

STRIVING FOR IMPREFECTION

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I have an interesting take on the pursuit of "perfection." I believe that striving to be perfect is at best a barrier to actually getting "better," and — in many cases — an excuse or a justification to avoid having to change one's bad habits.

A bold or unusual view? Maybe; but, as an example, let's take a common scenario. Suppose you decided to do something about those "few extra pounds" you've been carrying around lately. With fierce determination, you emphatically announce that you're giving up anything sweet, fried, gooey, crispy, brown, sugary, or with even a hint of alcohol. Furthermore, you will start writing down everything you eat, cook with only organic ingredients, read all labels, consume unprocessed nutrients only, count all calories — and, on top of all that, start a daily 5AM walking program.

"I'm going to be perfect on my program," you boast, with chest proudly swelled, to anyone who will listen.

And you are — until the end of the first day.

By nightfall, the constant drone of annoying phone calls, interruptions, cranky constituents, unmet deadlines, and various other unexpected events has you drained. You drag your tired soul into the house, drop your purse on the table, collapse on the couch, exhausted, and tell yourself, "One beer won't hurt. Besides, after a day like today, I deserve it."

That's true. Those 20 pounds weren't caused by "one beer." The extra weight was actually caused by the thought that follows.

As you lick the last remnants of golden foam from the glass, you are reminded of the promise you made yourself. The thought immediately explodes into the forefront of your mind: "Oh-oh, I blew my diet!" There is a pause while you consider your next step. But before you can tell yourself it's only a minor slippage

and get back on track, the next spark that scampers across your tired gray cells is, "Well, as long as I blew it, I might as well REALLY blow it. I can always start again tomorrow."

Once the dam has broken loose, the remainder of the evening consists of "one last night" of scavenging the kitchen, finishing off the ice cream, tearing into the bar of chips, eating the peanut butter from the jar, swallowing a pound of cheese slices, and — oh yes — making sure the six pack of beer will be gone before you go to bed. You do all these (or at least you tell yourself), "so you won't be tempted tomorrow. If I can get it all out of the house, I'll be OK."

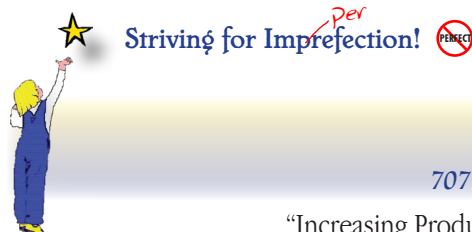
It sounds good in the moment. And when the alarm buzzes the next morning at 5AM, reminding you to do your walking program, you think, "Oy, it's so early. I'll start that on Monday."

You head to work, face the same day you faced yesterday. (After all, aren't most days pretty similar?) And, at days end, you come home, collapse on the couch — and repeat the process.

So it goes . . .

The problem lies not in drinking a beer or having some ice cream, but in the thoughts that lead to the actions; as well as those that follow. It's the belief that I have to be "perfect" that gets in the way of actually making improvement.

For example, if instead of perfection, the goal had been to be "better about my health," the diet would have been off to a great start on day one. Yet, since the measure of success was all or nothing — perfection or failure — day one fell within the loss column. In a world made only of blacks and whites, a near miss is as bad as big miss. There is no difference. Since we can never be perfect, we will always be falling short. Since we're falling short, we're a failure. Since we're a failure, why even bother to change?



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Labeling events “success” or “failure” is more than semantics. When we “fail”, we seek comfort. Although “bad” behaviors might not be healthy, they are comforting. That’s why we do them; for emotional support. It’s ironic, but focusing on our failures therefore actually *increases* the odds of engaging in those very “failing” behaviors.

On the other side of the coin, if we can focus on successes — no matter how small they seem — we are inspired, which sharpens the senses, allowing new feelings and, therefore new ideas to move to the forefront of our thoughts. As a result, new patterns are generated; negative behaviors are reduced. There is as much truth to the statement that “success breeds success” as there is to the truism I share in my seminars and keynote speeches, “If guilt and shame were motivational, we’d all be happier, healthier, and more successful.”

This is not to say ignore what doesn’t work. That’s just plain stupid. However, to change the results we get, we first have to change our view; because the reality is we cannot change anything but that and our own behaviors. Our co-workers, family members, constituents, council members, might — and I say *might* — make minor changes to accommodate us, sure; but the bottom line is we will still have to adjust what we do. It is imperative, especially in the challenging times in which we now find ourselves, that we must find ways to congratulate ourselves whenever possible and be less hard on our ourselves when we mess up.

Success only comes in small steps. That’s frustrating, sure; however, failure arrives in a great big clanging, bang, and all at once. The choice of what we call the results of our actions can make all the difference in how well we do what we do.

Strive for Imperfection. Don’t try and do it all, just do one thing more than you did before, congratulate yourself for that. Repeat as necessary.

About the writer:

Scott “Q” Marcus refers to himself as a “THINspirational Speaker and Recovering Perfectionist” He lost 70 pounds in 1994 and now uses the lessons he learned to help individuals and organizations break down the barriers of procrastination and productivity to be more productive, healthier, and happier. He is a syndicated columnist, award-winning speaker, and the author of three books. He has spoken to clerks in several states. This article can be downloaded from www.InspirationForCityClerks.com and he can be contacted at scottq@ScottQMarcus.com or 707.442.6243