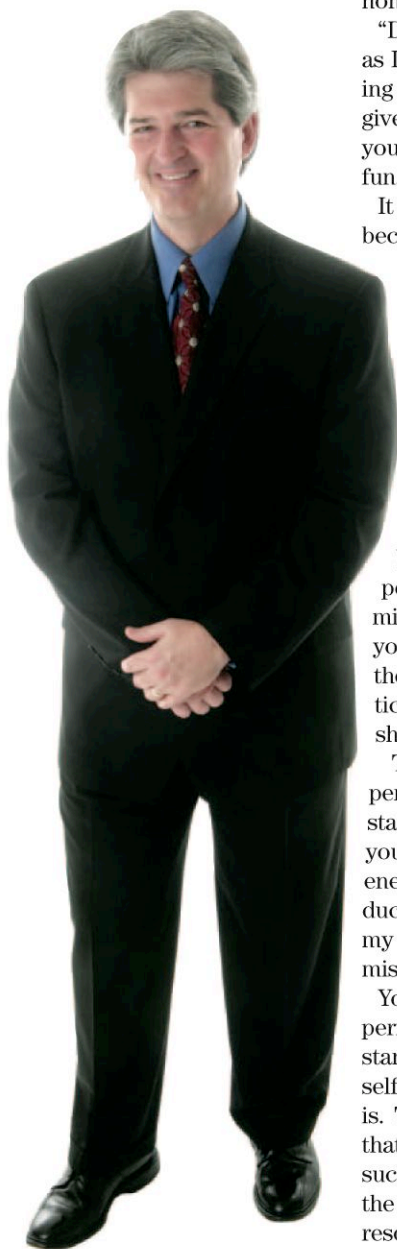


The high price of perfection

Set realistic goals to generate energy and enthusiasm.



I saw the black leather boxing glove an instant before it landed solidly on my right temple, a blow that, while less than full strength, made my knees buckle.

I was training with champion kickboxer Phillip Botha, who was instructing me on a technique that I couldn't seem to master. My irritation grew with each failed attempt until finally, I did what no fighter should ever do: I dropped my hands in complete frustration.

And that was when he hit me. Like all great teachers, his intention was to drive home an important lesson.

"Do you see what you're doing?" he said, as I tried to clear my head. "You're expecting to be perfect, and when you're not, you give up in frustration. When you do that, you learn nothing, and you miss all the fun."

It was a message I would not forget, because it taught me one of the greatest lessons in the business of life — the high price of perfection.

Do you expect to be perfect? Many of you would say no, but your real answer can be seen in how you respond when you fall short of your expectations.

For example, when someone compliments you on a personal achievement, do you deflect the compliment by focusing on the one thing that wasn't perfect? Do you mentally replay your mistakes, going over and over them as if you could somehow go back and avoid them? Do you set goals that are unrealistic, and then berate yourself when you fall short?

These are examples of the high price of perfection, of measuring yourself against a standard you can never meet. Every time you do this, you pay a price in terms of lost energy, diminished confidence and a reduced quality of life. And, in the words of my teacher, you learn nothing, and you miss all the fun.

You can avoid many of the problems of perfection by beginning with a realistic standard. Before you set a goal, ask yourself what an objective definition of success is. Take into consideration all the factors that will influence your ability to reach it, such as how much experience you have, the new skills you will have to learn and the resources you have available.

Then set a goal that represents your best possible performance, given these factors. Goals that are both challenging and realistic inspire you to stretch and grow. Expecting perfection only sets you up for disappointment and defeat.

Once the goal is set, developing a method of tracking your progress is one of the most important tools in avoiding perfectionism. You know that reaching any goal consists of repeatedly taking several steps forward and at least one step back. But unless you keep score, you'll be tempted to view every step back as a failure instead of seeing it in the context of all you've achieved so far.

Keeping score also enables you to celebrate your success at different points along the way, instead of waiting until the goal is reached.

If you were perfect, you would pursue your goal with dedication and enthusiasm every day. But the reality is that at some point, you will be tired, or your inspiration will simply lag. When this happens, you need to reach for resources that can help you. But they will only be available if you plan ahead.

For example, I have a folder of letters, cards and e-mails that I have received over the years about my leadership and my impact on the people around me. When I encounter a moment of self-doubt, I can take out that folder and begin reading. In only a few minutes, my spirits lift, and I'm ready to get back in the game.

Take time to plan for the resources you will need before you actually need them. If I had waited until I was down, it would have been too late to begin collecting the items in my folder.

Start today to move from the defeat of perfectionism to enjoying the energy and confidence of meeting the goals you set.

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