PURSUE MASTERY
TO FIND MEANING, SIMPLIFY
INTEGRITY, STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE
CELEBRATE FAILURE, LEARN FROM SUCCESS
CALMNESS, STRESS AND THE CHOICES WE MAKE
MY MOTIVATION ISN'T YOUR MOTIVATION
EMBRACE THE POWER OF SMALL
SEE PEOPLE AS THEY ARE
LET GO OF PERFECT

Let Go of Perfect

Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

In the Introduction, I shared the spoiler that Cloud 9 Thinking involves relinquishing perceptions that you may previously have held on to quite tenaciously. Many chapters in this book explore common viewpoints that can be challenged and let go. Others introduce new perspectives that might be accepted in their place.

This chapter is most definitely about letting go.

Carrying around inside our minds a perfect idealised conception of how we are meant to act as managers, be viewed by others and even how our projects should turn out, is a tragedy. By tragedy, I don't just mean that it can make you feel unhappy, although it undoubtedly will. I am using tragedy in the original Greek dramatic sense; that a flawed belief or misdirected action will make the downfall of an otherwise

capable hero inevitable *even when that bad outcome is the very thing that they are seeking to avoid.*

I am stating very bluntly that if one of your beliefs is that 'perfect' is always the objective, then this view is more likely to undermine your efforts to achieve success than it is to help you get there. Let me share some examples of how this belief can tragically impact the performance of people and teams.

When staff surveys ask people to list the qualities they admire about those in leadership positions, the ability to generate and sustain people's motivation often ranks very highly. Quite right too. But the way in which many managers respond to this leadership requirement is by believing that they need to continually carry around enormous reserves of motivation in order to spread this around every member of their team. As a consequence, when individuals in their teams are not performing as they hope, managers who think this way will consider it to somehow be their own failing and may become disheartened and demotivated. So, if your idea of personal managerial perfection is where your own force of desire will translate magically into individual motivation for every person in your team, then let me set something straight: it won't.

Understanding and accepting that you cannot motivate anyone other than yourself should take a lot of weight off your shoulders. I am a professional motivational speaker and yet I have never motivated anyone except for myself.

What I have done, mainly through storytelling, is clarify objectives and set visions in people's minds; using vivid pictures to hopefully fire imaginations. I have enthused people and hopefully inspired them, but their motivation must come from inside. They must discover their own force of

motivation. In **Cloud 4** we will look in more detail at the differences between the emotion of enthusiasm and the psychological drive of motivation, and we will explore how you can inspire and help people find their force of own motivation. For now, I am simply asking you to accept you don't have to single-handedly carry the burden of collective motivation. If that's part of your *perfect*, you can put it down now.

I'd like to try to further unshackle you and your team by challenging another belief that many of us have about 'perfect'. It is often assumed that aiming high and being the best is all about *getting stuff right first time*. In their worthy desire to deliver excellence as an endpoint, many managers believe that everything must be perfect from the start. It often escapes people's minds that unless you happen to be a neurosurgeon, an air traffic controller or a concert pianist, you really don't need to deliver perfection first time, or all of the time.

Most ideas are iterative; you start with an original version that is subsequently refined and improved over time, usually through the input of many different people. In most endeavours, aiming for *right first time* when it applies to ideas is counterproductive. It ignores a lot of other, potentially better, inputs for a start. It is also unattainable and so is not only demotivating and potentially harmful; it's a waste of effort and opportunity. Whenever humans become involved in anything, perfection has a tendency to wander out the door. Beneath the airbrushed surface of any successful business around the world, you would see that they are all made up from an eclectic mix including talented, highly experienced experts as well as a majority of dedicated employees working to achieve common goals. And despite most of these people having given everything their best shot, every one of

them will, at some time, have screwed up. Thankfully, they are all imperfect; because if you asked the most highly successful businesses where their very best ideas, innovations and breakthrough discoveries came from, you might be surprised to learn that many of them were the result of a mistake, which was then iterated and improved until the idea became perfect.

In **Cloud 6** we will look at why the process of innovation is actually dependent on failure in order to foster progress. Without errors and mistakes, a lot of new breakthroughs simply wouldn't be discovered; so business leaders must learn to shift the focus of analysing failure, making it less about assessing costs and assigning blame, and more about eliminating poor options and quickly identifying any resulting ideas that can be developed. We must learn from the mindset of researchers in areas like psychology, mathematics, theoretical physics and computing where results of failed experiments and null hypotheses are published in academic papers because of the contribution these failures make to cumulative understanding in these scientific fields.

At the cutting edge of industries like technology services, bioscience and computing, where companies have an entrepreneurial, experimental and academic mindset, it is not uncommon to find a culture of celebrating failure as an opportunity to learn quickly and move forward. Such companies have let go of notions of seeking perfection; they just want to find what works.

There is a far more everyday enemy of success that also stems from notions of perfection, and that is *procrastination*. If we are honest, we may recognise this as much in ourselves as in others. A typical situation might be that a report,

presentation or project plan needs writing. The parameters are identified, goals are set and fully understood, and there's no shortage of enthusiasm; and yet nothing is happening. You find yourself over and again staring at an empty screen or blank piece of paper. Why?

There are many reasons this might be. Sometimes it's a prioritisation issue; you or others around you may simply be too busy, distracted or overwhelmed to focus right now on anything relating to the future. This calls for ruthless action. **Cloud 5** will look at how to determine which priorities are most important or urgent and offer a framework for deciding whether tasks can be deferred, delegated or even discontinued in order to protect your time for things only you can do. I warn you now that this is not a comfortable exercise. It involves asking whether many day-to-day tasks that you routinely do yourself have become a convenient excuse for not addressing other issues and goals that stretch your capabilities and take you outside your comfort zone. In other words, prioritisation is often not the real reason for procrastination.

If you've already reprioritised other tasks and stared into the abyss of what will happen if you don't get started on a project, and it is *still* not even begun, then I suspect your barrier is a form of perfectionism. A major reason why many people delay starting tasks is because they don't have all the answers. They believe the end result will be better if they wait for *just one more* piece of information. It's an understandable viewpoint because starting without the full facts is an uncomfortable feeling, but this view is also a logical fallacy; part of the process and purpose of any project is to acquire the necessary information as it progresses. Being willing to start something before they have all the information is

exactly what distinguishes innovators and entrepreneurs. In their minds, being willing to embark on a course of action when inputs as well as outcomes are still uncertain is not a risky course of action because they trust that answers to questions will emerge. In fact, entrepreneurs are more likely to think that the biggest risk lies in not starting, because that way the answers won't come to them but to their competitors. For tasks involving an element of creativity the challenge is especially difficult because without the flash of inspiration from your creative muse it can be difficult to know how to start. As we examine in **Cloud 9**, creativity relies on input from your subconscious mind and the very act of starting a project can trigger the familiar routines and thought processes that free and unblock your subconscious. If you find yourself in this situation, remember what poet and author Charles Ghigna says so eloquently; '*Don't search for inspiration . . . just start your work and you will see that it will soon find you*.'

For most of us, the best way to counter perfection-based procrastination is to focus on a process, not an outcome. For example, when I set out to write a 200-page book, I didn't wait until I felt I could write all 200 pages perfectly. Instead, I broke the task down. Starting with just the barest outline, I next filled in the missing information by asking the businesses and people I work with what their biggest workplace issues were and what questions their teams were asking. I then had a series of chapter topics and could start authoring a page or a sentence at a time, testing my ideas on anyone who would listen, expanding these ideas and making amendments and corrections as I went. I didn't worry that my early ideas and drafts were frankly pretty poor. I focused on finding a writing process that worked for me, and once I'd started I found that the task could only move forwards.

As a writer, I'm swimming in a small pond compared with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jane Smiley. Jane has over 30 books to her credit and must be more than familiar with the tyranny of a blank page and the intimidation of deadlines. That's probably why her words on this subject are so insightful: '*Every first draft is perfect, because all a first draft has to do is exist*.'

Procrastination is normal and we all do it to a degree. Excessive procrastination can be based on notions of perfectionism and is a common block to success. You may be interested to learn that there is a name for an obsessive fear of imperfection: *atelophobia*. I am not suggesting that people who procrastinate are suffering from atelophobia. However, I do believe that perfectionists are unnecessarily hard not only on themselves, but on those around them.

If workplace goals are not met because projects don't get initiated on time and you suspect perfectionism lies at the heart of this, then the problem runs deeper than a lack of immediate productivity. Procrastination is a workplace disease that has a high impact on the overall well-being of your team. Individuals who procrastinate excessively can suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem; the more prolonged any delay, the more anxious they become. They are not only more prone to workplace stress as individuals but they can be difficult and uncomfortable colleagues; not getting the best out of teammates.

As a leader, you can help your team overcome perfection-based procrastination by openly challenging a viewpoint that perfection is always the goal, especially at the outset of a project. You can also reassure people that they can learn to live with the discomfort of not knowing all the answers they will need. But by far the greatest difference will come when you

back all this up by consciously fostering a culture where it is OK for people to admit that they don't know all the answers, when it is permitted to make mistakes and where people are encouraged to ask for help whenever it is needed. How to do this is in fact the topic of **Cloud 7**, which looks at building team resilience.

The last point I want to make in this opening chapter is one I personally consider to be amongst the most important in this book. For what seems to be an increasing number of people in the workplace, a desire to live up to some perfect and unrealistic conception of *how they should be* is so overwhelming that they constantly think they are failing and falling short. They suffer from a nagging insecurity that they *don't deserve to be here* in their role. Instead of seeing perfection for the myth that it is and just trying to do the best they can in their jobs, such people suffer a crippling anxiety and become more determined than ever to avoid making mistakes. It is not difficult to see how this can have catastrophic and self-fulfilling consequences: if people are scared to make mistakes, they are resistant to trying anything new and therefore deny themselves opportunities to learn to overcome their fears.

Today, the term *imposter syndrome* is widely used to describe such feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy in the workplace. Before the 1980s, imposter syndrome wasn't a term used outside the sphere of academic psychology. Today it is a leading topic and studies have stated that around 70 per cent of people will experience at least one such lifetime episode of feeling this way.[1]

What I would like to explore here is an idea that for most of us, some feelings of work-related self-doubt and anxiety

are an entirely normal reaction to particular situations and are also strongly linked to our mental template of what constitutes perfection. I'd also like to make it very clear that, in trying to take a slightly wider perspective on this issue, I am not in any way seeking to diminish the genuine suffering that those with imposter syndrome undergo. Thankfully, this is now a clinically recognised psychological condition and there are a range of therapies and services available to help people.

A characteristic of someone with severe imposter syndrome is that they would experience their negative feelings as overwhelming, debilitating and permanent because they arise from deep-rooted beliefs and insecurities about themselves. For the rest of us, feelings of self-doubt may be an entirely rational human reaction to unfamiliar situations. Self-doubt may also be a measure of the degree to which we can learn to manage our own conception of 'perfect' as it relates to different aspects of our workplace performance. I would go so far as to say that some occasional feelings of doubt are positive. They are reassuring proof that you have enough insight to anticipate that an environment or a challenge you face will require you to develop skills and abilities you may not feel confident about. Recognising and acknowledging where you need to develop is a great strength. If you don't believe me, think about anyone you have ever met who is blissfully unaware of their own shortcomings, limitations and ignorance. They are a person who lacks insight and there are more of them out there than you would believe.

As we shall explore further in **Cloud 5**, human brains evolved to deal with the world as it existed 300,000 years ago. Despite all the changes in the way we live now, the

fundamental neural wiring of our brains hasn't changed a great deal since then. Consequently, our own brains can create perceptions, emotions and biases that are not only poorly adapted to today's modern world; we are often completely unaware that this is happening. One such example is the so-called *negativity bias*, which describes the psychological basis for why we find bad news easier to believe than good news and tend to dwell on our own and other people's negative perceptions rather than positive viewpoints.

The explanation for why our brain works this way goes back a long way.

When our ancestors lived in caves and ran away from sabre-toothed tigers, there was a significant evolutionary advantage in having a brain that could focus very close attention on aspects of our surroundings which could be threatening or harmful to us. The brain developed a mechanism designed to give priority to bad news and recognise it faster next time. The better this mechanism worked, the more evolutionary advantage it conferred and the more the genes responsible for this ability were passed down to all the descendants who hadn't been eaten by predators. Eventually, this brain mechanism evolved to work really well indeed.

The part of the brain that processes our response to events and experiences is the *amygdala*, which is a complex structure of cells in the midbrain making up part of our limbic system. Neuroanatomists have shown that around two-thirds of the neurons in the amygdala are pre-wired to recognise bad news rather than positive stimuli, and will preferentially transfer negative events and experiences much more quickly to our memory. In comparison, positive events and experiences usually need to be held in conscious awareness for a period of

10 seconds or more before they will form enduring memories. Our brain's bias towards perceiving and storing negative news doesn't stop there. Not only are negative event and experience memories stored more readily and more quickly, research shows that they are retained for longer than positive memories in what psychology researchers have termed positive–negative asymmetry. We are quite literally wired to over prioritise bad news.

Now we can begin to understand why we are more likely to dwell on negative workplace comments or instances where we didn't perform as we hoped, whilst under-estimating compliments and positive performances. Even when the positives significantly outweigh negatives, our brain's in-built negativity bias can create a different perception. Of course, the human brain is more complicated than a simple memory-creating system, so we do possess the intellectual means to over-ride our evolutionary default setting. Many factors including our upbringing, our social relationships and other inputs determine how we interpret the information we hold inside our memories, and the single most important factor we can control is how we create a mindful dialogue around the good and positive aspects of our lives. As explained earlier, positive events and experiences will form stronger and more enduring memories when they are held in conscious awareness; when you pause and allow yourself time to actively think about them.

If this bias towards overweighting negative experiences is part of the explanation for *how* imposter syndrome can occur, it can't be the explanation for *why* there has been such a recent explosion in the number of people reporting that they feel phony and underconfident in their workplace or in

other situations. After all, human brains have been wired the same way for 300,000 years. What else has changed? I'd like to suggest that the change in how people feel about themselves is linked to changes in more recent decades, particularly around our consumption of social media. We have fostered a society where we continually and often unconsciously compare ourselves, our achievements, abilities and indeed our whole lives with other people. We are as helpless to turn off this unhealthy aspect of our thinking as we are powerless to turn off our smartphones. Even more worrying, we cannot even recognise the subtle ways in which these comparisons are influencing our thinking. For example, if you are videoconferencing with colleagues who are working from home, it is almost guaranteed that people will have behind them an artfully curated background containing a tidy bookshelf, tasteful lamp, family photo, holiday souvenir, degree or diploma certificate and some sports or professional award. It's an arms race. Choose to compete if you like with your own carefully arranged backdrop, but don't beat yourself up if your whole home doesn't look like the immaculately presented scene behind someone's head on your screen. Because neither does theirs – it's all just appearances.

In the modern workplace, there seems to be a culture of downplaying the effort we put into our accomplishments. When did it become uncool to admit you worked hard? When I started in business, I wanted to be seen as hard working. Nowadays, we may spend all night writing a report only to tell our colleagues and bosses '*Oh, it's just something I put together quickly*.' Again, see this for what it is; part of the arms race, not something objective you should compare your report-writing ability with.

Comparison-based self-beliefs can be especially damaging when they become self-fulfilling. Presenting to meetings and handling formal social situations are both learned skills. These skills may come more easily to those with an outgoing disposition, but we can all become better. If no-one let you in on the secret that the most accomplished presenters have, despite what they may say, probably rehearsed endlessly, you might think that you could never become a confident presenter. And if you believe you won't, then you won't.

How are we meant to be confident in our abilities when other people are creating an illusion about theirs? Because even when we do something well, that positive experience may not change our self-belief if we put our own success down to hard work, but attribute other people's success to ability? We must learn to see this differently. I like to imagine that my work life is a bit like playing a game of poker. Each card in my hand represents an experience, skill or ability that I bring to the table. Like cards, these skills can be changed and upgraded when I am given an opportunity, and I take calculated risks based on what I absolutely know for certain I have in my hand. But what if the other players at the table were playing a subtly different game, in which they were not just occasionally bluffing, but were allowed to tell outright lies about what cards they held and what hands they played. How might you play the game differently, without accusing your co-workers of being frauds and phonies and demanding that they show their hand at every turn? One answer is that you could start to lie too. Or you could accept that you can't see what hand other people hold, and you can't necessarily take people at face value. All you can focus on

is playing your hand as best you can and stop beating yourself up with unhelpful comparisons. You can also help other people understand these issues too. As a business leader, you can foster an environment where it is accepted that feelings of self-doubt are a normal human reaction to unfamiliar situations. You can recognise that such anxieties are common around transitions to new roles or responsibilities and particularly amongst younger or newer team members – and ensure these people are supported.

But the issue is, sadly, really much bigger than just a workplace issue. I'd like to end this chapter with a quote from Stephen R. Covey.

> *If we are not secure in our self-definition, we look to the social mirror for our identity and approval. Our concept of ourselves comes from what others think of us. We find ourselves gearing our lives to meet their expectations. The more we live what others expect of us, the more insecure and pretentious we become.*
>
> *[. . .]*
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> *If the vision we have of ourselves comes from the social mirror – from the opinions, perceptions and paradigms of the people around us – our view of ourselves is like a reflection in the crazy mirror at the carnival.*

These words sound like a warning of the perils of modern social media; about the empty vanity of creating a manufactured online version of ourselves and measuring our worth through others' validation of this, whilst knowing that even we don't live up to this idealised image of ourselves.

Yet Stephen Covey wrote his words in 1992; years before ubiquitous internet usage and a decade or more before the social media explosion.

We can't put the social media genie back in the bottle, or re-wire the human brain so it isn't continually making negatively biased comparisons with other people's lives and achievements. In **Cloud 7** we will look at what you can do as a business leader to play your part in creating a work-place environment that is free of distortions. What would happen if everyone in your team grasped that it's their choice whether or not they constantly want to be perfect in the world generated by the media and people posting illusions on social media; but they knew that in your business, *you'd just like them to be themselves*? It's guaranteed there will be an instant, possibly audible, release. With this weight off their shoulders, everyone will suddenly look and feel taller and they will be set free to concentrate all their efforts on doing a great job.