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*Passion leading to  
performance.*

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# Why Perfect Doesn't Work



This article is abstracted from the Introduction of the book *Coaching Passion to Performance* by Blaine Bartlett. The book is due to be published in Fall 2007.

**A**s a coach, one of the more typical causes of problems encountered is the all too common human desire to be perfect or to perform perfectly. Defaulting to this desire to be and do perfect will encumber both the client and the coach. Better to focus on striving for doing and being excellent in our performance. There is more than just a semantic difference between the words perfect and excellent. There is also an energetically experienced difference that can either compel greater performance or stop it altogether.

When striving for perfection there is no room for error. The outcome is black or white. The performance, project, result or objective was either delivered according to specification or it wasn't. Often, nothing can (or does) happen performance wise until perfection has been attained. Continual refinement accompanied with continuous judgment become the order of the day. Interestingly, none of the traditional measures of perfection will typically include as a top level question "does it work or not"?

Functionally speaking, excellence refers to workability. Something is excellent when it performs or when it works in a way that creates a minimum of unintended consequences. In this sense, it's elegant. It's not perfect, yet it functions extremely well.

The advantage of focusing on excellence rather than perfection is that doing so keeps the action moving forward. What we are essentially doing as a coach is working to create an environment that makes it possible for the client to *live into* their outcome rather than *live up to* an arbitrary standard of what that outcome should be and how it should be attained. This distinction is energetically one of literally moving forward (living into) versus standing still (living up to).

As a coach it is useful to be familiar with some of the qualitative differences that separate these two performance approaches. As you might expect, perfection has some extremely strong dynamics associated with it. Some are so strong that they can literally shift the focus *away* from performance. Chief amongst these are the following:

- Focus on protection of a valued self image where there is no room for error
- A pervasive mood in lifestyle in which the client operates out of fear (i.e., not being good enough, not measuring up, being "found out", etc.)
- Major risks are either avoided or highly calculated
- Obsession with a need to control and be "right"
- Critical judgment of self and others against an arbitrary standard

- Scarcity of choices ... do it by “the book”
- Focus on protecting what I’ve already got – playing not to lose versus playing to win
- Focus on mechanism vs. creativity
- Primarily concerned about “looking good” ... a “me” focus
- Narrowing of focus that allows for seeing *only* the chosen path to the outcome to the exclusion of other possibilities
- Classic win/lose approach to relationships

As you can probably imagine, over time a focus on being (or doing) perfect also creates telltale hallmarks in and with the “body” of the individual. We’ll explore the notion of “body” far more fully later in the book. Suffice it to say at this point that I use the term “body” to include not just the physical but, as well, the energetic, the emotional, the mental, and the spiritual bodies we inhabit. Within this context of “body”, a perfection approach sets up a state whereby constriction, rigidity, narrowness of focus and a general mood of judgment will almost always be experienced by the individual and those around him or her. This is not an insignificant consequence. Inasmuch as one aspect of leadership we attend to as a coach is the quality of movement our client engenders in their followers this movement will be (and is) strongly influenced by the leader’s “body”.

As an alternative, a focus on excellence can be seen as having the following basic attributes:

- Willingness (even a desire) to learn from mistakes
- Action based on excitement, energy, fun, enthusiasm
- Willingness to take challenging risks
- Operate from clarity of purpose and empowerment
- Readily operates from acceptance and appreciation of differences
- Seeking of feedback and diversity of input
- Utilizes creativity and acknowledges the abundance of choice
- Dual focus on the journey as well as the results
- Concern for the greater good ... an inclusionary “we” focus
- Establishes win/win based outcomes

Again, a dominant focus on being (or doing) excellent will also create telltale hallmarks in and with the “body” of the individual. These will generally manifest as a relaxed and open body. Approachable is a word often used to describe someone with this orientation. Shoulders will tend to be relaxed, eyes will tend to be softer, and, internally, the voice of criticism will be dampened. Not surprisingly, this “body” impacts the eternal world in a way that is likely to foster a quality in the movement amongst the followers of a leader that is materially different from that of the perfectionist leader.

Having said all of the above I want to be sure to point out that I'm not speaking here of abandoning standards or of abandoning a commitment to continuously improving. One can have extremely high standards and still be coming from a position of excellence. In this case, the difference between the two perspectives is the answer to the question "for the sake of what?" do these standards exist. With an approach rooted in excellence, the answer to the question is going to be oriented to the desired outcome that eschewing to the standard makes possible. With an approach rooted in perfection the answer to the question will tend to be because the standard itself is important — often as important as the actual outcome. Again, it's really a question of what does achieving the standard make possible?

To use a sports example to illustrate this difference one need look no further than the efforts by champion golfer Tiger Woods to continuously refine and improve his swing. To some, it could look as if he is being a perfectionist. However, within the framework of excellence versus perfection it is my position that Tiger is operating from a position of excellence. He is not standing still; his efforts to improve are for the sake of being the best golfer that has ever played the game; he is not concerned about appearing less than to others when he is in the throes of the rebuilding process—he's learning. It's a generative as well as a productive process for him.

A core question for the coach and the client is which of the two approaches is likely to be the more generative? It is my position that anything the coach can do to encourage an excellence based approach to the coaching process, to their client's process of moving toward their outcomes, and to living in general will ultimately produce results that are far more sustainable and welcome.

As a matter of fact, coaching the client in moving from an approach that tends to perfection can be (and usually is) a wonderful coaching opportunity in and of itself. Being able to draw the client's attention to the differences between the two approaches opens the door to far richer conversations and far more sustainable results than may otherwise be possible.

~ Blaine Bartlett ~