



Why You Should Practice Imperfection: Leadership Explained

By Lou Solomon

We might respect smart leaders who never give us a glimpse behind their title – and we might comply with directives that come from people who manage their image so well that they seem to be perfect. But we are influenced and engaged by people who make an exquisitely imperfect, human connection. We like and trust leaders who can occasionally kick back and laugh at their mistakes. We want to work with and for people who can do something rare – which is to speak from both the head and the heart.

A few years ago, I heard former Bank of America [CEO Hugh McColl, Jr.](#) speak to a group of entrepreneurs. We were there to hear about his philosophy, wisdom and advice. McColl talked about his life lessons. He reminisced about growing up in Bennettsville, South Carolina. His father was a cotton farmer first, and a banker second. Someone asked, “Did you ever consider farming?” and he responded, “I didn’t have the brains for farming.” We laughed and listened as though we were in the company of a dear friend as he shared his mistakes and the things his life had taught him.

Why don’t more leaders practice vulnerability and imperfection? It seems counter-intuitive for most. One business owner (we’ll call him Dave) told me, “I’m the owner. I’m the only one who can provide the solution to this problem.” Dave was under extraordinary pressure from the outside, but he was making his job more difficult and causing his team to distrust him by leaving them out. Leaders who try to be perfect, self-sufficient and all-knowing wind up having to throw their weight around and keep others at arm’s length. They focus mostly on keeping up the display of bullet-proof competence. Of course, competence isn’t a bad thing, but a hyper-focus suggests a trade-off. You do not have to choose between imperfection and competence. Imperfection and vulnerability are not weaknesses. They require true strength of character—which is influence at its best.

If you want to engage others and earn their trust, here are five ways you can practice imperfection:

Lead with questions, not answers

If you arrive with the right answer, people will withhold their best stuff—the very stuff that may lead to the next breakthrough. Learn the art of inquiry. Ask questions that begin with, “What have you noticed, how do you think we could improve, what is keeping us stuck, what do you love about it?”

Share lessons learned, admit mistakes

Know-it-all-ness is off-putting and stifles innovation. The leader with natural influence says, “Let me tell you about something I learned the hard way,” instead of dictating the course to take.

Leave room for others to be right

Watch out for the destructive practice of making people wrong. Even if their idea is not the way to go, acknowledge the contribution. When teammates have the opportunity to be right, they have more spontaneity and freedom of expression. When you establish a safe environment in which people have the opportunity to be right, they will take ownership of the results.

Insist on feedback, welcome challenge

Let the team know you won't tolerate compliance for the sake of pleasing you—and that you have no need for yes men and yes women. Ask, “What do you need from me to nail this project?” And “What am I missing on my end?” We trust and engage with leaders who are not threatened by people who speak their mind to offer value.

Change your mind

The confident leader understands it is not necessary to be the only big deal in the company. Cemented certainty can lead to pride of ownership and close mindedness. On the other hand, if people know they can approach you and make a case for another solution on a project, you will always be presented with the best ideas to maintain a competitive edge. If someone has a better idea, change your mind along with the course of action. You will earn the reputation of being fair and open-minded. Leadership is never perfected, only practiced. If you hold yourself separate as the one who has to “get it right” and have all the answers, you weaken your influence. To be imperfect and vulnerable requires confidence, courage—and leadership.



Lou Solomon is an author, TEDx speaker and founder of Interact, a communications company that helps executives and their teams develop into strong communicators, with a focus on making real connections, earning trust and building influence..