

# The compelling case for 'good enough' in the workplace

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Several years ago, I wrote a column suggesting there are certain situations in which it is better to deliver work that is less than perfect. It resulted in an angry e-mail from a reader, aghast that I was advocating for anything less than an above-and-beyond effort.

“Leaders expect high performance from their staff,” she said, “and employees should strive to deliver nothing less than 100 per cent.” But I stood by my assertion then, and I still stand by it now.

Natural adaptive systems don't predict, they don't plan, and they don't perfect. When organisms in nature are faced with any kind of threat – predatory, environmental, or internal – they adjust and alter until the threat is neutralized.

They don't spend time and energy up front trying to predict what the threat is or where it is coming from. Instead, they use sharply-honed observational skills to respond to challenges as they come up. And they don't put significant effort into planning for potential threats. They just shift and act, as many times as necessary, until the current situation is once again acceptable and passable.

They never seek to achieve a perfect solution; they just keep adapting until things are “good enough.”

I get that the phrase “good enough” evokes all kinds of emotions. It implies that you're just coasting along, exerting the bare minimum of effort required to accomplish whatever needs to get done. It conjures up images of apathetic employees, drifting and idling through the day, only coming to life as the weekend or payday nears. But perhaps it's time to let go of this nuance, this subtext that implies indolence and sloth. Perhaps it is time to celebrate the biggest advantage of “good enough” – adaptability.

Adaptability lies somewhere between reacting and predicting. In nature, if an organism reacts to a crisis, it is likely too late. And in a complex world, attempting to predict the next crisis is near impossible. Adaptability is the ability to respond efficiently to a wide range of potential challenges, even if they are unknown or unanticipated. And it is a skill that every organization and every employee should seek to embrace.

There are numerous examples of organizations (and people) that spend so much time predicting and planning that they get bogged down in bureaucracy. By the time they've finished their forecasting and their designing, the threat or challenge has already morphed into something else.

In his thought-provoking book *Learning from the Octopus*, scientist Rafe Sagarin recounts how the U.S. Department of Defense in 2004 started designing mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles, or MRAPs, to combat the threat of improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, in Iraq. Unfortunately, it took three years of analyzing and optimizing before these vehicles finally arrived in Iraq, by which time IED attacks had significantly reduced.

But the effort wasn't wasted, declared the bureaucrats in Washington: A new conflict was developing in Afghanistan, and the MRAPs could be redeployed there. Alas, the MRAPs, which were built to travel on roads, were useless in the rugged terrain. Thousands of hours of predicting and planning went into perfecting the MRAPs, but in the end, the problem they were designed to solve had mutated into something else.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not recommending that you should sweepingly cease to identify threats and opportunities. Nor am I proposing that you eliminate your one-year, three-year and five-year plans. But I am saying that when you predict and plan *ad infinitum*, seeking that oft-elusive perfection, what you'll lose is your adaptability.

The last eight pandemic-filled months have given rise to many examples of successful adaptation. As knowledge about the coronavirus has grown, protocols have altered, sometimes weekly. As waves of infection have ebbed and flowed, rules have changed, sometimes daily.

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And the businesses that have thrived are the ones that have adapted – in what they manufacture and in the services they deliver. Breweries pivoted to producing hand sanitizer; restaurants shifted to in-home experiences. These companies didn't plan for the pandemic, and they're not trying to predict what will happen next week, let alone next month. They're just focusing on delivering a product or service that is "good enough."

So now is the perfect time to let go of perfection and set your sights instead on being "good enough." If you can get past the negative undertone of the phrase, your long-term survival will be your competitive advantage.

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