

LIVING WITH EXCELLENCE:

Escaping The Perfection Trap

By **Sam Sukumar**

INTRODUCTION: The Seduction Of Perfection

A year ago, I hesitated to write publicly. I believed I needed more experience, deeper insights, or the ideal first piece. But eventually, I realized something critical: if I waited for perfection, I would never begin. So, I chose to start exactly where I was—imperfectly, yet earnestly—and committed myself to growth through action rather than stagnation in idealism.

My struggle with perfectionism isn't unique; it's embedded in how many of us approach life, work, and relationships—distorting leadership, relationships, parenting, activism, and even self-worth. Rather than celebrating improvement, we relentlessly pursue a mirage—the flawless ideal. Perfection seduces us, promising fulfillment, yet always keeping true satisfaction just out of reach.

This mindset traps us in cycles of dissatisfaction, blinding us to genuine progress. Yet, another path is possible—shifting from the chase of unattainable perfection to the cultivation of measurable excellence.

Pause for a moment. Reflect honestly:

- Are you celebrating your progress, or are you fixated on flaws?
- Does perfectionism motivate you or paralyze you?
- What would you start right now if you weren't waiting for perfection?

Instead of asking:

- *Am I improving?*
- *Is this better than before?*
- *Are we moving forward?*

We often ask:

- *Why isn't this perfect yet?*
- *Why does this fall short of my vision?*
- *Why does this still contain flaws?*

Real growth and lasting change come not from perfect conditions but from imperfect, persistent effort.

Excellence, unlike perfection, is the commitment to continuous improvement and authenticity through action, vulnerability, and reflection—not a flawless final state.

Embrace imperfect action with the 70% Rule: **If you're 70% ready, start. Don't wait.**

The Excellence Shift invites you to:

Reset your mindset with simple yet powerful questions:

- What is genuinely problematic versus simply imperfect?
- What is already effective that perfectionism obscures?
- What small step can I take today?

Excellence is refinement through action, courage through vulnerability, and authenticity through continuous growth—not a perfect final state. This approach transformed my journey, moving me from silent hesitation to the courage to speak openly.

Today, I invite you to do the same. Don't wait for perfection. Choose excellence, let momentum carry you forward, and allow your life to unfold with intention, authenticity, and grace.

Start today!

PERFECTION'S COST: Everyday Impact

Leadership & Organizational Culture

The perfection problem:

Leaders expecting flawless execution often instill a fear of mistakes among employees. The consequence: teams hesitate, burnout spreads, and innovation stalls.

A deeper look (NASA's journey):

NASA faced significant setbacks, including the tragic Apollo 1 disaster. They could have succumbed to perfectionism, halting the program entirely. Instead, NASA embraced imperfections as vital learning opportunities. Their commitment to excellence—measured in learning and iterative progress—eventually achieved one of humanity's greatest triumphs: landing on the moon.

The excellence shift:

Great leaders regularly ask, “Did we improve? Did we learn from this?” rather than “Was this flawless?”

Personal Relationships & Emotional Intimacy

The perfection problem:

We set unrealistic expectations for friends, family, and romantic partners—expecting perfect understanding, constant availability, and unwavering empathy.

A deeper look (Navigating imperfection in relationships):

Consider marriages that last decades. They flourish not because spouses are perfect, but because they grow through missteps, misunderstandings, and vulnerabilities. Genuine intimacy emerges from grace in imperfection, not flawless alignment.

The excellence shift:

Cultivate relationships by embracing continuous understanding, patience, and humility, rather than expecting impossible flawlessness.

Parenting & Educational Development

The perfection problem:

When parents expect children to never falter, they unwittingly communicate conditional love. Consequently, children internalize perfection as a prerequisite for self-worth.

A deeper look (Einstein's struggle):

Albert Einstein, now synonymous with genius, struggled academically early in life. Instead of perfectionist standards, he was nurtured by curiosity, exploration, and resilience. His brilliance emerged precisely because he was allowed to fail and keep learning.

The excellence shift:

Teach children adaptability and the courage to embrace challenges. A child equipped to handle setbacks is far more prepared for real-life success than one sheltered from failure.

Social Activism & Societal Progress

The perfection problem:

Movements for change often falter when participants become fixated on ideological purity or radical immediate outcomes, dismissing incremental progress.

A deeper look (Civil Rights Movement):

Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement succeeded not because it instantly achieved a flawless society, but because it methodically pursued sustainable steps toward greater justice. Recognizing incremental progress as valuable, they transformed an entire nation's conscience.

The excellence shift:

Social evolution thrives through sustained effort and gradual refinement rather than demanding instant utopia.

Self-Worth & Personal Growth

The perfection problem:

We often tell ourselves that only a flawless version of ourselves—perfectly successful, completely wise, or entirely accomplished—deserves recognition and respect.

A deeper look (Entrepreneurial vulnerability):

Entrepreneurs like Sara Blakely, founder of Spanx, openly discuss early setbacks and humbling moments. Blakely didn't wait for perfection. She grew, learned, adapted, and succeeded precisely because she embraced vulnerability and imperfection.

The excellence shift:

Measure personal growth not by flawlessness, but by genuine movement, courage, and adaptability. Replace “Am I perfect yet?” with “Am I evolving? Am I embracing my full humanity?”

PRACTICING EXCELLENCE: Practical Tools For Change

Excellence Check: Reframe Your Questions

When perfectionism creates frustration, pause and ask yourself:

Am I chasing an impossible ideal, or am I noticing meaningful progress?

Is this improving compared to where I began?

What can I refine, rather than discard, to move forward?

The 70% Rule: Embrace Imperfect Action

In every pursuit—career, creative work, personal endeavors—commit to the 70% Principle:

If something is 70% Ready, launch it. Perfection is neither realistic nor necessary to begin.

If you feel 70% Prepared, step forward courageously. You'll refine your path as you go.

If something aligns 70% with your values, support it. Imperfect yet aligned efforts deserve commitment.

Remember LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman's wisdom: “If you're not embarrassed by your first product version, you've launched too late.” Real excellence unfolds through action—not waiting indefinitely for perfection.

The 3-Question Reset: From Paralysis To Progress

When stuck in a perfectionist loop, reset your mindset by asking:

What is genuinely problematic, versus what simply clashes with my imagined perfection?

What is already effective that perfectionism is blinding me from seeing clearly?

What realistic step can I take right now to move toward meaningful improvement?

FINAL THOUGHTS: Excellence, Not Perfection

A society—or an individual—obsessed with perfection will perpetually feel inadequate, overwhelmed, and stalled. But one dedicated to excellence will continuously evolve, refine, and grow.

Whenever frustration or dissatisfaction arises—whether with your work, relationships, or your own journey—ask yourself this critical question:

“Am I chasing perfection, or am I committed to real, measurable excellence?”

Perfectionism leads only to disappointment and stagnation. Excellence leads to a meaningful, impactful, and fully-lived life.

I learned this firsthand. If I had waited to feel "ready" or "perfect," I would never have shared these words. Yet by embracing imperfect action, I discovered growth, confidence, and fulfillment that waiting could never provide. This principle isn't limited to writing.

It applies universally: *Start now, start imperfectly*. Let each step you take be an intentional act toward excellence, not a hesitant step away from perfection.

Your life is a journey to be refined and enriched with every step, not a stage waiting for perfect conditions.

So don't delay.

Start today.

Allow excellence to unfold through intentional, courageous action.