

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

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### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

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#### **The need to rein in perfectionism**

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In psychotherapy we have a useful concept to take the pressure off parents who feel they need to be perfect. We say they need only to be “good enough”, and that an important way of achieving that is to create the right environment for their children to thrive.

This implies allowing themselves to have imperfections and failings while supporting their children through their rages and anxieties in order to help them cope with life’s realities. All parents have their limitations; they are not perfect.

Being “good enough” does not imply mediocrity or complacency, but rather that mistakes are an inevitable and necessary part of growth and further achievement. Perhaps businesses, especially those that are intolerant of errors, imperfections and different approaches, could learn lessons from the notion of “good enough” parenting.

With many businesses facing financial restrictions, there can be a pressure to achieve goals more quickly, resulting in people working harder and longer hours but not necessarily more efficiently. Mistakes become more likely, as does the need to cover them up.

Nigel Nicholson, professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School, and author of *The ‘I’ of Leadership*, says organisations with an attitude of “We are the best and we are people who do wonderful things”, encourage executives to set too high expectations for themselves. He sees the problem as often self-induced by people who want to take on more because they think it will give them an advantage.

He outlines how this can lead good people to do bad things, including cheating and other deviant behaviour. “Terrible disasters have been caused by people airbrushing over mistakes they don’t want to admit. Often driven by unreasonable expectations, such as ‘We are an organisation that doesn’t make mistakes’, you are immediately encouraging people to conceal errors. In trading environments, for example, where the worst thing you can do is to conceal losses, people under pressure may hide losses, and that becomes a very slippery slope.”

Individuals can compound the problem. Those with perfectionist personality traits will go to any lengths to avoid mistakes because the fear of failure, and the imagined potential consequences, feel unbearable.

Perfectionists may either spend too much time on details or doing the wrong thing and as a result lose perspective. Or, terrified of making mistakes, they become paralysed with fear and nothing gets done. Even the smallest risk can feel overwhelming.

Perfectionism can be a way of overcompensating for feelings of inadequacy and the anxiety of uncertainty. For many, it is an attempt to control the world around them and avoid the consequences if they were considered not to be up to the job. These fears are often imagined, and deeply rooted in childhood.

A chief executive who takes a radically different approach is Eva Chen of Trend Micro, a global software security company based in Japan, which employs about 5,000 people worldwide.

Ms Chen believes that businesses today must change their mindset to adjust to a world of uncertainty, and cites unpredictable events such as the credit crunch, the eurozone crisis and the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami as examples that make goal-setting ever more unrealistic.

Instead, she concentrates on her staff's ideas, particular talents and capacity to respond to change and uncertainty.

This was never more apparent than when a crisis hit Trend Micro in 2005, four months after she became chief executive. One of the company's files caused millions of computers worldwide to crash and also created a ticketing problem that disrupted the Japanese railway system.

"If things are unpredictable you can't expect people to set a goal and say you must achieve this goal. [Instead], say, 'you have the spirit to overcome any problem, or any obstacle in the future' – that is all we can ask for. A business is just like a person – it has emotions and non-logical thinking," she says. "How can you expect a business, which is just a collection of people, not to have emotion? I think traditional business tries to ignore that part and believes that business can be run by logic. That is not true."

One example of her approach of trying to create a climate free of fear, so that employees' minds can flourish, was her decision during the credit crisis to reduce the salaries of senior management rather than lay off staff.

Since that 2005 software disaster, Trend Micro's sales have doubled, and its strategy illustrates how businesses, like anxious parents, can benefit from the "good enough" approach.