

Foreword by Andy Hargreaves

It is pointless to strive to be imperfect. And it is impossible to achieve the opposite of imperfection for long in anything that truly matters. In most areas of life, perfection is a futile goal. Zero tolerance policies, elimination of achievement gaps, the insistence that failure is not an option and impeccable leadership – for most things, in most circumstances, these ends are all unattainable. Not only are they unattainable, they are not even desirable. The cosmetically altered wrinkle-free face, the orthodontically perfect row of teeth, the flawlessly scripted speech – don't all of these lose a vital part of what makes us human, distinct and interesting? As the late Leonard Cohen pointed out, 'There is crack in everything.' And that, he added, is 'where the light gets in.'

Striving for excellence is admirable. Pursuing perfection is a trap. In *Overcoming Perfectionism*, Ann W. Smith (2013, p. 8) argues that 'the desire to be superhuman becomes a problem when we begin to believe that perfection is actually possible and even necessary for self-esteem, success, peace of mind, and acceptance by others.' Relentless perfectionism, she writes, ultimately leads to obsessiveness, depression, addictive behaviour and burnout.

The truth is that we are all imperfect. Whether we are parents, colleagues, performers or leaders, imperfection is something we can never escape. It is part of the human condition. In 'Imperfections', Celine Dion sings about how she has her 'own imperfections', her 'own set of scars to hide'. We need to remember that this applies to children too, sometimes. As every parent knows, it is unrealistic to expect young people to be perfectly behaved all the time.

Being an imperfect leader is not something we can deliberately accomplish, like being a transformational, inspirational or servant leader, for example. Imperfection will happen to us anyway. We cannot avoid it. Imperfect leadership, rather, is about how we handle our imperfections and make the most of them, while eliminating or at least mitigating their harmful effects on others. Imperfect leadership is about acknowledging our own and each other's flaws, learning from them and even loving each other for them a bit – like the brilliant but absent-minded professor, the efficient manager who can get a bit too uptight on occasion, or the passionate yet vulnerable leader whose heart on their sleeve may sometimes beat too loudly for other people's comfort.

The issue that Steve Munby and Marie-Claire Bretherton address in this excellent book is not how to become an imperfect leader on purpose. Trying to come across as a mere mortal when you truly believe you are a hero or a god will only be a source of irritation as well as ineffectiveness. False humility, staged self-deprecation and insincere apologies are as unconvincing as the forced grins that people try to pass off as genuine smiles. They are as excruciating in real life as they are in Ricky Gervais' fictional leadership portrayals in the TV sitcom, *The Office*.

There is a depth of authenticity and honesty, rather than just a level of skill or sophistication, which marks out the imperfect leader as someone we can trust, admire and follow. Imperfect leadership is about who we are and how we are with others, which is manifested in what we do and seek to accomplish with those around us, together. It is not a toolbox or a rule book for leadership that has no connection to the development of our inner selves.

At the same time, imperfect leadership is no excuse for hapless or incompetent leadership. And while public disclosures by sport stars and celebrities about their struggles with mental health have made it easier for everyone to stop covering up their flaws, expressing weakness or vulnerability can be overdone if it degenerates into emotional indulgence. Indeed, in a paper critiquing the rise of psychological interest in well-being as a way of dealing with unresolved issues of social inequality, for example, University of Birmingham professor Kathryn Ecclestone (2011, p. 99) has pointed to how the concept of vulnerability has expanded beyond 'those with mental illness or disability, and those unable to protect themselves from harm and exploitation to anyone receiving any health treatment, therapy or palliative care'. Other categories like post-traumatic stress and depression have also expanded to become more all-encompassing over recent years.

To sum up: imperfection is not a get-out clause for poor performance; vulnerability must not descend into self-obsession; and apologies for mistakes are no substitute for redemption and restitution concerning those we have wronged.

Clearly, when we look at the idea of imperfection, and at the nature of imperfect leadership, there is more to them than meets the eye. In this excellent sequel to *Imperfect Leadership*, Steve Munby – a proven leader of school districts, of an iconic national organisation for educational leadership and of a global education charity – joins forces with Marie-Claire Bretherton – a highly experienced school leader and one of the education system's best collaborators and school improvers – to look more closely at imperfect leadership in action.

Their book identifies some key attributes and actions that characterise imperfect leaders. Some of these, such as the importance of trust, building relationships, admitting mistakes and empowering teams, are already very familiar in the literature of leadership, although it is good to read about them once more from a practical and not just a theoretical standpoint. Other attributes are more novel and may, momentarily, take the reader aback. Making public promises that could come back to haunt you, doing the right thing even when your career prospects are put at risk, narrating compelling stories as well as sharing important data and, my favourite, finding the right balance and relationship between power and love in interactions with others – these are all explained clearly and also illustrated practically from both the authors' own extensive leadership experiences and from inspiring case examples of imperfect school leadership all around the world. There are engaging tools for personal reflection and practical guides for how to manage processes more effectively as a self-avowed imperfect leader. The cases ring true. No blushes are spared. The authentic nature of struggle, setbacks and overcoming adversity leaps off almost every page.

I have known Steve Munby for forty years. When he was a friend and colleague early on in our careers, he always struck me as someone who was simultaneously courageous and terrified all at the same time. He always wanted to make a positive difference, he was sometimes terrified by what he had taken on, and yet, with lots of help and advice, including a bit of my own, he always found a way through in the end. In later years, in some of my most challenging leadership moments, my own dark nights of the soul, I have sought Steve's advice in turn, and benefitted from the moral support, strategic insight and ultimate optimism of his coaching support.

And now we are colleagues together, leading an international organisation that we have created with a small team of associates, which serves seven ministers of education, their senior civil servants and their professional leaders, so we can advance humanitarian goals, policies and strategies in education globally. Through this work, we have been able to help system leaders to be imperfect leaders, too, in how they strive for genuine improvement, work collaboratively with others and admit it when they have taken a wrong turn or feel stuck.

To be an imperfect leader is human. To live imperfect leadership with others can sometimes attain an almost transcendent quality that reaches far beyond the individual ego to encompass something greater than oneself.

Imperfect Leadership in Action

This book will change your thinking. If you are worn out with trying to be perfect, it may change your life. Best of all, if you take its lessons seriously, it may help to change the lives of everyone else that you care about as an educator.