



The Secret to High-Performance: Constant Striving

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Our [name](#), Groupaya, is a combination of “group” and “upaya.” [Upaya](#) is a Sanskrit term from [Mahāyāna Buddhism](#) that roughly translates to “skillful means.” It’s a concept that captures the journey and practice that leads to a higher goal. It’s a name that resonates strongly with what we’re about: working intentionally and skillfully in groups to create a world that is more alive.

As is evident from our name, all of us have been influenced by Buddhist principles to varying degrees. I am particularly fascinated by an apparent contradiction in principles that seems to manifest itself often. On the one hand, much of the popular literature on Buddhism emphasizes the importance of being content with how things are. As [Stuart Smalley](#) likes to say, “You’re good enough, you’re smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like you!”

On the other hand, the central figure in Buddhism is [Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha](#), the founder of this spiritual movement who apparently achieved total enlightenment. By embodying perfection, he showed that perfection was possible and an ideal worth striving for.

How do you reconcile self-contentment with the strive for perfection?

I think what matters is the “striving” part, not the “perfection.” You can’t be perfect, and so you shouldn’t be unhappy with yourself when you’re not. However, the act of seeking perfection reveals character and manifests itself in the results. When you try, you get better, and you do better.

There’s a practical issue around striving for perfection, however. You can always spend more time striving, but there’s a diminishing return. Jiro Ono, [the legendary sushi chef](#), requires his cooks to practice for 10 years before they’re allowed to prepare the eggs. 10 years! I’ve never had the pleasure of eating his eggs, but are they really that much better than what someone who spends, say, one year training, is capable of preparing?

It depends on how you define “much better.” With eggs, maybe the improvement doesn’t manifest itself in a way that most people can detect. But in other situations, that marginal return could literally be the difference between life and death.

In his book, [Better](#), [Atul Gawande](#) described the remarkable performance of the [Minnesota Cystic Fibrosis Center](#), where patients were living an average of 15 years longer than those at other centers. Why were they doing so much better? [Warren Warwick](#), the director of the center, explained:

A person’s daily risk of getting a bad lung illness with CF [cystic fibrosis] is 0.5 percent. The daily risk of getting a bad lung illness with CF plus treatment is 0.05 percent. So when you experiment

you're looking at the difference between 99.5 percent chance of staying well and a 99.95 percent chance of staying well. Seems hardly any difference, right? On any given day, you have basically a one-hundred-percent chance of being well.

But it is a big difference. Sum it up over a year, and it is the difference between an 83 percent chance of making it through [the year] without getting sick and only a 16 percent chance.

As Gawande explains throughout his book, the doctors in his field who achieve high-performance are those who relentlessly strive for it. Seemingly insignificant differences add up to big differences over time.

So when is enough enough?

Last week, our designer, [Amy Wu Wong](#), was [graphic recording](#) a client meeting that I was facilitating. When we were setting up, I asked her to write down the five big ideas we'd be discussing, and I told her not to fuss over them too much, as they would probably change during our discussion. Amy proceeded to write them down, then stopped and gazed at one of them.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It doesn't look right. I'm going to do it over," she responded.

I looked at what she had done. I couldn't find anything wrong with her work. Frankly, I thought she had overdelivered (as she often does). So I looked at her and shrugged. "We have time," I said. "If you want to do it over, do it over, but I think it's fine."

That was the key: We had time. I didn't want to repress the instinct to strive for perfection. She saw something that I didn't see, something that mattered to her. If we had other priorities, I would have told her to move on. But, we didn't.

Frankly, I was proud of her, proud to have her on my team, proud of the collective attitude that it reflects from all of us. We have high standards, and we're constantly striving to raise the bar. Our challenge is finding balance, understanding that every choice we make is usually at the expense of something else. Through constant practice, we need to learn to do our best within reason, to take pride in what we achieve while continuing to strive to do even better.

Understanding what "within reason" means is the ultimate challenge. I am constantly coaching both clients and colleagues on how to work openly and transparently, which often amounts to being comfortable with revealing work-in-progress. By definition, "work-in-progress" is work that you're not satisfied with. However, what we need to understand is that *all* work is ultimately work-in-progress, and that ultimately, it's about doing the best you can within reason and letting go.

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