RETHINKING PERFECTION
by Ilana Ridge

Most of us grow up with the idea that *perfection* means flawlessness. No cracks, no mistakes, no gaps. Yet if you look closely, perfection is rarely measured against reality. It's often measured in comparison:

- Comparison to others: how we stack up against peers, competitors, or role models.
- Comparison to expectations handed down: what culture, family, or organizations say we "should" be.
- Comparison to an inner standard that keeps shifting the moment we approach it.

This is why perfection becomes such a trap. It isn't just about doing things well. It's about chasing something that is always just out of reach, flawless in theory but never in practice.

In leadership, this often translates into the constant drive to get everything just right;

- Every presentation polished.
- Every report bulletproof.
- Every word measured to be just right.
- Every decision justified beyond question.
- Every answer expected on the spot.
- Every meeting steered without misstep.
- Every challenge solved without hesitation.
- Every team dynamic flawlessly managed.
- Every risk eliminated before it appears.
- Every objective executed without obstacles.
- Every role carried as if being the perfect leader.

It also shows up in how projects are planned. Leaders often try to eliminate all risk upfront and design the "perfect plan." But that plan doesn't exist. No matter how much we prepare, the unexpected always arrives.

This is where the first illusion of perfection lies: believing we can create a risk-free, challenge-free path. Instead of striving for the flawless plan, the real strength is planning for how challenges will be handled when, not if, they arise.

On the surface, this drive for perfection can look like commitment to excellence. But underneath, it creates exhaustion, self-doubt, and paralysis.

And here's the real problem: life never actually gives us that finish line.

We keep thinking: *"Once I arrive there, then I can finally rest. Once everything is in place, then I'll feel enough."*

But that "there" keeps shifting. The next project, the next deadline, the next challenge … the bar moves forward as soon as we approach it.
Perfection, defined this way, is a race without a finish line.

A Reframe: Perfection as Presence

If perfection as flawlessness is the illusion, then what's the alternative?

Perfection can be redefined as: **presence in doing the best you can with what you have, as you are, in this moment.**

This isn't about lowering standards or "settling." The destination, the outcome, the vision, the goal, is never compromised. What changes is how we get there.

- A perfection approach tries to control every variable upfront, chasing the flawless plan.
- A presence approach accepts reality as it unfolds and asks: *"Given where we are, what's the best next step we can take with what we have?"*

The end result remains the same. The difference is whether the path drains energy and morale, or builds resilience and trust along the way.

For leaders, this reframing has practical impact:
- It means focusing less on the flawless plan and more on resilience in the face of the unexpected.
- It shifts teams from avoiding mistakes to learning from them quickly.
- It creates cultures where people feel safe to contribute ideas, take initiative, and innovate without fear of being judged for "not getting it perfect."

A quick example: Imagine a project derails because a team member misses a deadline, creating a domino effect that delays the entire project:

- A perfection mindset reacts by spiralling into blame. Energy goes into pointing fingers and replaying what went wrong, while momentum stalls.
- A presence mindset acknowledges the miss, addresses reality, establishes accountability, and asks: *"What's the best step forward from here?"* Instead of collapsing into fault-finding, the team regroups, makes new agreements, learns, and keeps moving.

In both cases, the disruption is the same. The difference is whether it becomes a dead end or a doorway forward.

Both leaders still want excellence. Both are heading toward the same goal. But only one keeps the team moving with resilience and clarity.

Presence turns perfection from a moving target into a grounded practice. It's not about everything being "just right." It's about everything being fully met right here, right now.

Perfection pushes for control and creates pressure to get it all right. Presence adapts to what's unfolding, builds resilience to handle what comes, and leads with trust in yourself, your team, and the process.

Coaching reflection

As I reflect in my coaching work, I often see this same pattern: people set a goal and expect progress to unfold in a straight line. There's an underlying belief: *"Once I arrive, then I can rest."*

Yet what I actually see happening in reality is different. People work hard toward a change, then feel discouraged when old patterns resurface. They assume it means they've failed, or that they're "not there yet." What's really happening is not failure, it's the natural rhythm of growth. We return to the same themes again and again, each time with more awareness and a little more capacity.

When progress is mistaken for a straight line, the focus shifts to chasing a tick-box moment when everything will finally be "done." That is perfectionism disguised as progress.

Here's the distinction I often share with clients:
- Perfection mindset: *"Once I arrive, then I can rest."* (Future-focused, conditional, always chasing.)
- Embodiment mindset: "Progress is already happening in how I show up today; in this decision, this conversation, this next step." (Present-focused, practical, ongoing.)

When people see this, the pressure softens. Instead of measuring themselves against a finish line, they begin to recognise that the work is already happening right here, right now.

Why This Matters for Leaders

In my coaching conversations with leaders, perfection shows up in very familiar ways. There's the pressure to always have the answer, the instinct to eliminate every possible risk, and the drive to keep the team moving without a crack in the system.

What I often notice is that this pressure doesn't just live in the leader, it filters into the culture. Teams pick it up quickly. People hesitate to experiment, avoid speaking up, or second-guess themselves, because the unspoken expectation is that things must be "done right" the first time.

This is where the distinction between perfection and presence becomes so important. Presence doesn't compromise the end result. It doesn't mean lowering the bar or being careless. It means leading in a way that acknowledges reality as it unfolds, and keeping the team focused on *how* challenges will be met rather than chasing the illusion of a flawless plan.

When leaders make this shift, I've seen three things consistently change:
- **Pressure eases.** The leader no longer has to hold the impossible weight of getting everything perfect, and the team feels more permission to contribute.
- **Resilience grows.** Challenges are expected, not feared, which means they can be handled with clarity instead of panic.
- **Trust strengthens.** People trust leaders who are real, not flawless. Presence builds confidence that even when things go off track, the team won't collapse.

The goal is never compromised. What shifts is the path to get there, from rigid perfection to adaptive presence.

Closing Thought

Perfection isn't a flawless future state. It isn't a box to tick.

Perfection is already here, in the dignity of showing up sincerely, with what you have, as you are, in this moment.

This shift, from chasing flawlessness to leading from presence, is not just a mindset change. It's part of a larger truth about growth.

Growth is not linear. It's Spiral™.

We don't simply move from A to B. We loop back, revisit old patterns, and meet them at deeper levels of awareness and responsibility. What looks like repetition is often the very place where transformation takes root.

This is the foundation of my work, the Spiral™ Method, a presence-based approach to leading, healing, and becoming. It's a framework I explore deeply in my upcoming book, *The Bible of Spirit*, and it underpins all of iTransform's coaching and retreats.

Leadership isn't about having the perfect plan. It's about remembering to return to presence, meeting what unfolds again and again, and discovering that even the loops are part of the way forward.

Spiral™ shows us how transformation truly unfolds.