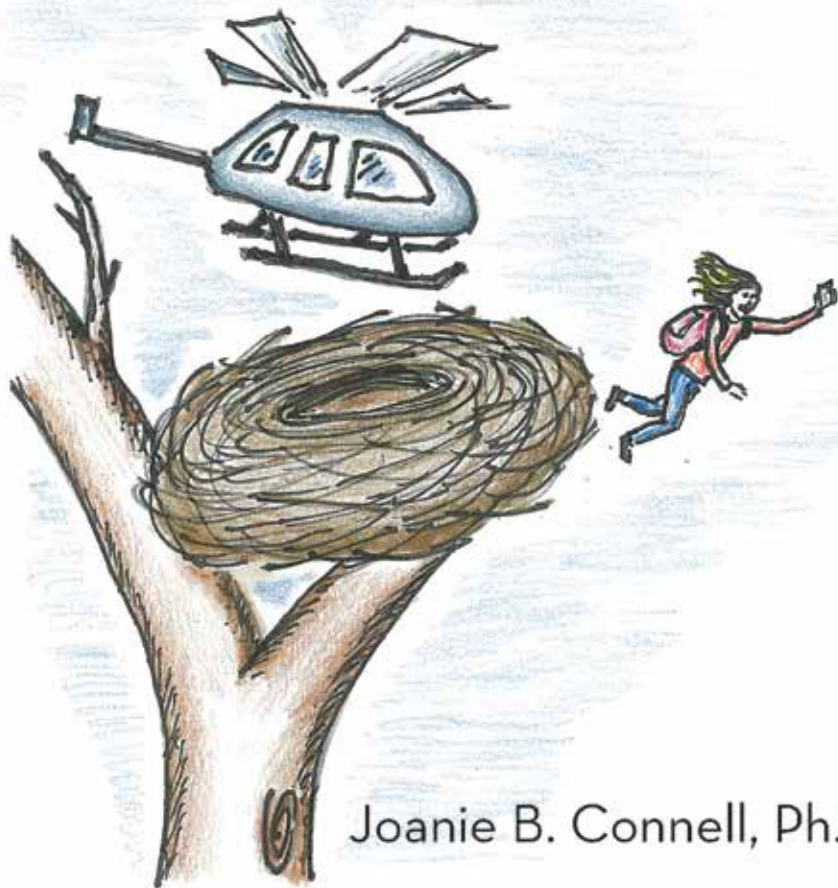# Flying without a Helicopter

How to Prepare Young People for Work and Life

Joanie B. Connell, Ph.D.

About the Author

Dr. Joanie B. Connell is an organizational consultant and leadership coach who specializes in maximizing leadership potential. She works with companies to attract, develop, and retain top talent. She works with individuals to improve their success and happiness in their careers. She is also an author of a soon-to-be-released book called *Flying without a Helicopter: How to Prepare Young People for Work and Life.*

As a consultant, Joanie develops leaders across generations. She coaches executives and youth at Flexible Work Solutions. She consults with organizations in a variety of areas, including executive leadership development, diversity, generations, flexible work arrangements, work-life balance, life transitions, character and ethics, team building, and virtual teams. Her clients are from Fortune 100 companies, not-for-profit, and government agencies and high tech, biotech, healthcare, finance, legal and other industries.

As a professor, she teaches/has taught business and psychology students of all ages at the Rady School of Management at the University of California San Diego, the Marshall Goldsmith School of Management at Alliant International University, and in the Masters in Human Behavior program at National University.

Joanie earned a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, and a B.A. in Engineering from Harvard University.

Joanie is available to consult, coach, present keynote speeches, and make media appearances. She also likes to write guest blog posts.

Praise for
Flying Without A Helicopter

"Joanie Connell details unique challenges faced by young adults and their leaders in the workplace, offering action plans readers can apply to their 'real work' situation as they move toward solution. This book was written for you—whether you are a manager, a young adult new to the business world, or a parent of that young adult. Thanks, Joanie, for zooming in on this timely topic!"

—**Ken Blanchard**, coauthor of *The One Minute Manager*® and *Great Leaders Grow*

"The problems Joanie Connell describes are real. Employees are entering—and leaving—the workplace without the levels of resilience and independence they need to succeed. I recommend *Flying without a Helicopter* to people who want to develop the life skills needed to succeed in the corporate world (and their parents) and to leaders who want their companies to succeed."

—**Daniel Bradbury**, CEO coach, investor, life science consultant, and former CEO of Amylin Pharmaceuticals

"Managing across generations now is remarkably difficult, as each one approaches timelines, deadlines, conflict, and recognition in different ways. To understand these differences and leverage the creativity within, you could do no better than to read Connell's Flying without a Helicopter! A wise read for leaders as well as employees, job seekers, and even parents!"

—**Marshall Goldsmith** author of the *New York Times* and global bestseller *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

Praise for
Flying Without A Helicopter

"We all want children who are resilient, happy and successful in their lives, doing what they are fulfilled in doing. And, many parents only really learned how to parent by what was done to them by their parents. Some of that worked—some of it did not. This resource will open eyes and equip parents with skills to 'change their parenting game' into a more effective approach with the dear people who mean the most to them—their kids."
—**Thomas G. Crane**, author of *The Heart of Coaching*

"This work is a must read not only for leaders and managers but also for parents and educators who can work together to create balanced individuals who value understanding, collaboration and depth and aren'tpressured into taking shortcuts to achieve illusory perfection."
—**Kathi Lutton**, principal and patent litigator at Fish & Richardson, mentor for the *Fortune Most Powerful Women Network*

Flying without a Helicopter

How to Prepare Young People for Work and Life

Joanie B. Connell. Ph.D.

CHAPTER 3
Accept Imperfection

There seems to be a movement toward having perfect children. In the past, parents felt they had done their job if their kids made it through childhood. Things like getting married, finishing high school, and getting a job were important. Going to college was great, if you were so lucky to have a kid who was bright enough to get in and want to go. As time went on, for the middle class, college gradually became a standard expectation. Now, it's not only expected that kids go to college, but also many of them are expected to go to graduate school too, and not any school will do.

It seems that kids today, unlike the rest of us, aren't allowed to have strengths and weaknesses. To get into a good college, they have to be "super people" (Atlas 2011). They have to be strong at everything. If they get 80s in math, they have tutors to raise their grades. They need to have the lead part in the school play, be an all-star athlete, win an award for writing the best essay, be the president of one club or another, have the best exhibit at the science fair, and, on top of it all, be popular. Wow, that's a lot of pressure!

> **Deresiewicz explains that the college admission standards have become so extreme that the kids who are accepted into elite colleges have only experienced success, never failure. "The prospect of *not* being successful terrifies them, disorients them. The cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential. The result is a violent aversion to risk. You have no margin for error, so you avoid the possibility that you will ever make an error" (Deresiewicz 2014).**

How does this show up at work? To answer that, we need to take a step back for a moment. We need to ask ourselves if it is indeed possible to be a perfect person. Unless we have given birth to Leonardo da Vinci, the answer is probably not (and even he had flaws). Given that it is unlikely a person is strong at everything, it means they will have to work harder in some areas than others to be good at them. To be good at anything—really good, award-winning good—you have to work hard, even if you have natural talent. Lacking the natural talent makes it that much harder. Thus, to be great at everything will require an inordinate amount of work. For people who are naturally driven and gifted, this may be okay. They may not mind exhausting themselves to do what it takes to be great at several things (but no one can be great at everything).

People who are not naturally driven will want to find shortcuts. Even those who are driven and talented but are limited by the number of hours in a day may seek out shortcuts, which can include

- realizing your teacher does not read the homework, so you do a sloppy job or don't turn it in at all;
- cheating;
- taking drugs to give you extra energy;
- taking on leadership roles in clubs and not doing anything during your term;
- having your parents do the work for you;
- learning to talk your way into and out of anything; and
- believing you are perfect and blaming any mishaps on external forces, not your own.

Cheating

Lately, cheating has become rampant. Kids feel it is justified; they feel no remorse, not even when they get caught. For example, Nayeem Ahsan, a student at Stuyvesant High School in New York, was caught

in a massive cheating incident on the Regents exams in 2012. He was sharing the answers on three different exams with 140 other students—and this wasn't the first time he cheated. He had been collaborating with other students on tests and homework for quite some time. He was interviewed after he got caught, was suspended from school, and was waiting to find out if he would be allowed back. He mentioned he wished he had been cleverer so he would not have gotten caught, he felt justified in cheating because the pressure was too great and the teachers were too lazy to check, and he thought he should be allowed back at school. As for punishment, he said he had learned his lesson and he shouldn't be punished further. He said, "The fact that I could have gotten kicked out, that changed my life" (Kolker 2012). He was shooting for a career in investment banking and wanted to expeditiously get back on track.

This is the kind of thinking that is entering the workplace—that cheating is justified and doesn't warrant punishment. For investment banking, this kind of thinking may have been going on for a long time, but it seems to be permeating the rest of society too and at young ages. More importantly, is this the kind of thinking we want to enter the workplace? Someone who gets caught for massive embezzlement and thinks he should be allowed to keep his job? We, as parents and adults, are fostering this kind of thinking and behavior in at least two important ways:

1. We are putting so much pressure on kids to be perfect.
2. We are going too easy on them when they get caught.

Nayeem got caught a lot earlier sharing the answers to homework on Facebook, but his teacher decided not to turn him in. Did he learn his lesson then? It seems the lesson he learned was to be more careful when cheating. Ultimately, however, the school did not agree he had learned the right lesson the second time around, and they kicked him out.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Denial among parents is rampant. I am constantly astonished at how perfect parents think their children are. A parent might be telling you how honest her child is as that same child is walking behind her, holding forbidden cookies stolen from the pantry. If the parent does admit to seeing the child with the cookies, she will find some way to explain it to you or tell the kid it is okay just this one time. Parents do not want to see that their child is doing something wrong. They don't want to hear about it either; if you say something negative about a friend's child, you will be lucky to keep the friend at all.

Kids are praised constantly (to boost their self-esteem) to the point that they think they are perfect too. If you give anything less than stellar feedback to people like this, they will either reject it entirely or collapse like a balloon that has a hole in it. They can't cope. This is extremely problematic in the workplace, where the truth will come out that they are not perfect.

Perfectionism at Work

There are two schools of thought on perfectionism at work. The first is: It must be perfect. Documents must be spell-checked and proofread, code must be debugged, equipment must be inspected, and so on. In some cases, perfectionism is without a doubt expected. For example, no one wants to die in a plane crash. If the president makes a gaffe, he is ridiculed for a long time. If the reel goes down in the movie theater, there is practically a revolution. Hospitals have backup generators to keep people alive in storms. There are many scenarios in which errors are not tolerated.

Early in my career, I did some mechanical drafting. I designed pieces of equipment for a stratospheric balloon that took measurements of ozone and other elements in the Earth's atmosphere. The first piece

I designed was a simple little box that was to hold some electronics. It came back from the machine shop with screw holes all up and down one side and no holes in the adjoining side. Everyone laughed and said I had designed "Swiss cheese." I had gotten a tiny detail wrong in the orientation of the drawing that caused the whole box to be unusable. In this case, getting the details right was extremely important.

"The Devil is in the details."

At the same time, perfectionists can impede progress in organizations. We talk about the executive losing sight of the forest among the trees. If you pay too much attention to getting every single detail right, you may never make it to your end goal. I have seen numerous examples of this, ranging from doctoral candidates who cannot finish their dissertations because they are so worried about getting it right and engineers who miss their deadlines because they are so worried about writing just the right subroutine to middle managers who spend so much time micromanaging their team members that they don't deliver the results the company needs.

This brings us to the second school of thought on perfectionism: Results trump the tiny details. For example, Microsoft releases Windows with bugs every time and offers patches to fix them later. If they had waited to reach perfection before releasing Windows, Apple would be the world standard. In today's fast-paced world of business, we don't often have time to sit and reflect on the details or check and recheck our work product to get to perfection. Technology has fostered an acceptance of imperfection. Fast-written e-mails fraught with typos and grammatically incorrect sentences have gotten us used to ignoring mistakes. Now I rarely see a professional PowerPoint presentation without errors in it. Books and newspapers even contain typographical errors.

"A good garden may have some weeds."
—Thomas Fuller, *Gnomologia*, 1732

33

Neither camp is right—at least not all the time. Put another way, in the world of business (and everywhere), we need to decide when we need to get it right and when "good enough" is better. And when it needs to be right, "good enough" will not do. This can be problematic to people who are used to getting A-pluses for less than perfect work. First, they don't understand the difference between "good enough" and perfect, and second, they can't take the criticism that their work isn't good enough.

The Illusion of Perfectionism versus the Reality of Imperfectionism

> **"The closest to perfection a person ever comes is when he fills out a job application form."**
> **—Stanley J. Randall**

I had a prototypical experience of the conflict over perfectionism a while back when I was running an executive assessment center. We brought in executive candidates and ran them through a series of tests and business simulations to determine what their strengths and gaps were for positions on the executive board. We had top-level people in from a large and influential organization, and we were under pressure to give them a high-quality experience. It was a customized assessment center, so we had to adjust to the client feedback as it came in. That meant we frequently had to make changes to our materials.

Unfortunately, every time we brought in a new group of executives to be assessed, there were errors in the materials that caused confusion for the participants and made us seem unprofessional. The interns were responsible for editing and producing the materials. After several occurrences of having to bear the embarrassment of the errors in front of the executives and subsequently give the interns corrections, I expressed my frustration over the lack of quality in the work product. The interns looked at me like I was crazy. They couldn't believe I would get upset over a few errors. They clearly thought I was being one

of those annoying perfectionists (old-school, mind you). I thought there was no excuse for producing unprofessional work. After all, how hard was it to proofread the documents? I could do it in a matter of minutes. Why couldn't they? Or, more precisely, why *wouldn't* they? Had they really gotten perfect scores at school by turning in work that contained errors?

I don't know ultimately how much our lack of quality mattered on this project. We finished a round of assessment centers for this client but were not hired back for more. Financial reasons were given for their decision. Another thing happened though. The interns did not like me anymore because I had criticized them. You could see that they were bruised from the perceived attack on their work, even though it was only the mildest of criticism by workplace standards. They did not bounce back or value the feedback. Rather, they tried to work with other people who only gave them positive feedback.

One more noteworthy thing happened on this project. The interns were frustrated that they had to keep doing the boring background work and were not given the opportunity to work directly with the executive candidates. Although I understood their desire to do the frontline work, I was surprised they thought they were ready. After all, they had not yet gotten the materials right. Didn't they need more practice at that first? Again, they looked at me like I was crazy. They said they knew how to develop the materials already, because they had already done it. They had no concept of practicing something until you get it right. Furthermore, they thought they should be able to work directly with the heads of a large company despite having had no practice at assessment. There was no concept of working up to it. They thought their schooling had given them everything they needed to give powerful executives feedback they could not even take themselves.

There are a number of issues at work in this case. The first was that there was a level of professionalism expected of the interns, and it was not being met. Second, there was a sense from the interns that they were perfect and able to do high-quality work without proving

themselves. I fault the adults who had been giving them false feedback all along and telling them they were perfect even though they were not. As challenging as it was to deal with interns with such inflated egos, the situation was not their fault. They had been told repeatedly that they were perfect. They got A's in school (which are perfect grades) and were undoubtedly brought up with a great deal of praise at home too. They were certainly brought up to believe they could do anything they wanted to, even give the executive vice president of a large company feedback on how badly he performed at the assessment center.

Here is another example. My business partner and I were invited to give a talk—for free—to a teenage leadership and community service club that raised money to donate to local causes. We were asked to talk about what leadership qualities are important in the workplace. When we arrived, the club president, who had organized our visit, was not there. She was not on her way either; we were told she was too busy to attend. The club secretary brought us into the room and left us to our own devices. We had to ask to get a projector set up and figure out on our own where we should position it. Meanwhile, a swarm of moms was in the adjoining room, preparing a luxurious spread of food for the teenage club members. After everyone ate, the moms swooped in and cleaned up while the meeting began.

When it was time, the secretary introduced us, but he did not know our names or what we were going to talk about. He said we could introduce ourselves. We got started with an interactive presentation that required club members to participate right away by walking around the room and examining provocative quotes on leadership. We were surprised to find that only about half the students got out of their chairs. We had to personally invite each seated person to participate. And even then, not all of them did. We continued on with the presentation even though many of our audience members were chatting with each other, typing on their laptops, and doing homework. When we were done, we were told we could leave while they continued with club business. We quietly gathered our belongings and snuck out the door.

There was no "thank you." We never heard from the club president by e-mail or any other way to thank us for our pro bono appearance or give us the feedback we asked for. We finally e-mailed her to follow up and did not hear back. We then e-mailed her mom (who we knew) and got a simple report that people liked the presentation.

How does this story relate to perfectionism? Clearly it is not an example of perfectionism in action. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The reason this story is relevant to perfectionism is that it illustrates how much pressure kids are under to have perfect résumés. Surely, being the president of a leadership club looks appealing to college admissions officers. What they don't know, however, is how poorly the work may be getting done. The kids seemed to be in it only for the required "community service" hours. They got a nice dinner, had time to do their homework and chat with their friends, and got to check off two hours of community service. Yes, there was a handful of them who showed some enthusiasm for our talk and the subject matter of the club. The rest, however, looked tired and preoccupied.

I wondered, after this experience, how much these teenagers learned from running this club. Did they learn how to effectively run meetings, make progress, and interact with leaders in the community? Or did they learn it really doesn't take any effort at all to run a club, community service is a joke, and Mommy will take care of us?

Let's apply this to the workplace. I have given a number of talks to professional organizations, including industry groups, community groups, and leadership groups. In every case, I have received either a small gift or a written letter of appreciation. I have always been met by the person who contacted me or been informed well in advance that I would have another contact at the location. People have never chatted through one of my presentations. Admittedly, some professionals have popped out due to "urgent" calls or e-mails, but they are discreet, and they usually apologize. Also, equipment does not always work according to plan, and delays occur. Rarely do things go perfectly, but they usually go professionally. And when they don't, it is very noticeable.

Joanie B. Connell, Ph.D.

In the workplace (and everywhere, really) people have reputations to uphold. I can't emphasize how important your reputation is in the workplace. People notice what you do (even if it's not posted online). They notice if you get the details right, if you dress appropriately, if you turn in sloppy work, if you don't show up when you say you will. You don't get perfect performance reviews for imperfect work. The stakes are higher at work than at school. If you lead a project and don't get results, there are consequences. You can't complain to the teacher to raise your grade. People notice when the road isn't finished, when the product is not on the shelves, when the judge denies your poorly researched legal brief, and when the drug does not meet FDA approval. At work, it's not just about filling in a résumé; it's about people's and companies' livelihoods. Your work product may not have to be perfect, but it really does need to be good.

In sum, it is important to know when excellence and even perfection are necessary and to follow through in these cases. When the details are not important, it is not worth stressing out over them or expecting excessive praise for doing a job that was good enough but not great. What won't get you anywhere is to think you are perfect and not really do the work. You may get away with that for a little while, but ultimately, you won't fool anyone but yourself (and maybe your parents).

Authenticity

· ·

REAL Life

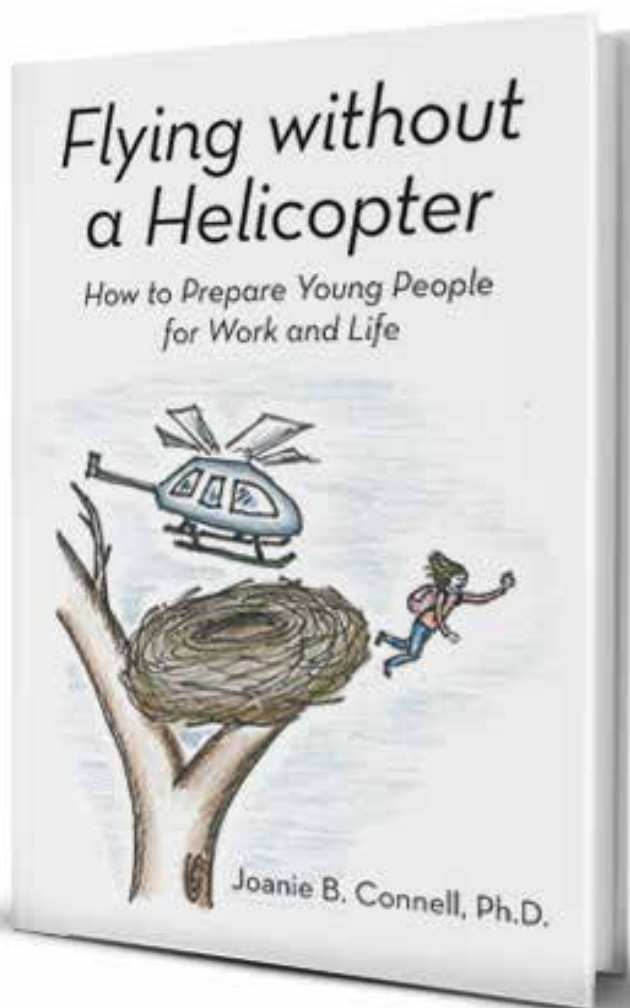**Resilient**
Empowered
Authentic
Limber

When we speak of imperfectionism, we are also speaking about authenticity. To be authentic is to be honest with yourself and with others. The first step in being honest with yourself is to make an accurate assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. Yes, you do have weaknesses; we all do. It's better to embrace them and try to develop them than to deny their existence. Only through becoming aware of yourself and your limitations can you be transparent with others.

It seems scary to admit your limitations, but it is actually a huge relief. It is so much easier to know you don't have to be perfect. Suddenly, you can accept yourself for who you are and not criticize yourself for not being able to do it all. You can also tell people what you are good at and where you have limitations to help set their expectations of you. What a relief it is to not have to be perfect for others too! Not only is it a load off your shoulders, but it is a great way to improve communication and collaboration with others. For example, one leader told his team he was incredibly shy inside. He had spent years overcoming his shyness, but it was still there inside him. He said he needed time to get to know his team members. His team was grateful to know how to deal with their leader, and he was relieved to be able to be himself.

Authenticity is covered in more detail in Chapter 6: Polish Communication Skills. The exercises in Part 3 will help you become more self-aware and authentic. They will help you identify your imperfections and embrace them. So will the next chapter, which focuses on resilience.

BUY YOUR COPY TODAY!

Flying without a Helicopter

How to Prepare Young People for Work and Life

Joanie B. Connell, Ph.D.