

Not too much, not too little – ‘just right’

Every senior leader I coach faces competing tensions. Drive versus wellbeing. Confidence versus humility. Direction versus flexibility. In daily executive life, I observe that these tensions aren’t abstract – they show up in relationships, decisions, culture and personal well-being.

What Gandhi described as satyagraha, Aristotle framed as the Golden Mean, and the Buddha called the Middle Way – they all point to a shared insight: the most effective path lies not in extremes but in balance.

In today’s leadership landscape, this perennial wisdom is sometimes reframed as the Goldilocks Principle: not too much nor too little – just right.



Why ‘just right’ matters in leadership

Leaders with good intentions can still undermine performance when they overshoot or undershoot their impact. Too much control erodes autonomy; too little guidance breeds drift. A rigid strategy blocks adaptation; a fluid strategy sacrifices clarity. The effect is the same – wasted energy, frustrated teams and slow progress towards goals.

The story of Goldilocks encapsulates a powerful pattern. Peak leadership effectiveness resides in the moderate zone between extremes – neither hot nor cold, neither overbearing nor absent.

In psychological terms, this aligns with avoiding black-and-white thinking – a mindset that rushes to extremes without discerning what truly serves performance and people.

Balanced leaders, in contrast, contextualise their responses and adapt rather than react.

The middle way: Beyond mere compromise

It’s important to distinguish the Goldilocks Principle from simplistic compromise. The wisdom of the Middle Way, as presented in Buddhism, doesn’t equate balance with passivity – it calls for *discernment*: active awareness of when to push and when to yield, when to prioritise performance and when to protect wellbeing.

For executives, this means:

- Balancing drive with humanity – ambition fuels performance, but compassion sustains people. One without the other compromises resilience and trust.
- Balancing decisiveness with listening – clarity instils confidence; curiosity builds ownership.
- Balancing consistency with flexibility – reliability strengthens culture; adaptability sustains relevance.

This is not compromise or indecision. It is strategic moderation – a calibrated leadership stance that elevates both performance and inclusion.

Goldilocks in practice: Where leaders find just right

Here are leadership areas where applying the Goldilocks lens has a real impact:

1. Decision making

Leaders often face a binary choice – act now or delay until perfect information arrives. Instead, aim for timely, informed decisions that are good enough to move the organisation forward while leaving room for iterative learning.

2. Team performance

Micromanagement chokes agency; lax oversight invites ambiguity. The “just right” leader sets clear expectations and supports autonomy through structured check-ins – enabling growth without losing alignment.

3. Workload and well-being

High achievers equate intensity with effectiveness – but burnout is the predictable result. True leadership balances challenge with capacity, calibrating workloads so teams are stimulated rather than depleted.

4. Feedback and communication

Too much information generates noise; too little creates uncertainty. Optimal communication – clear, relevant and human – builds psychological safety and performance alike.

How leaders learn just right

Mastering moderation is not innate – it’s learned through practice with reflective support:

- Reflective leadership – stepping back to assess where patterns drag toward excess or deficiency.
- Feedback loops – trusted advisors and teams help surface blind spots.
- Situational judgement – consciously choosing the amount of “heat” or “cold” based on context.

Walking the middle path is not easy, but it is a disciplined practice – one that protects against the extremes that erode culture and capacity.

*“Everything in moderation, including moderation”
– Oscar Wilde*

Citations

‘Finding Goldilocks: A solution for black and white thinking’, Psychology Today – Australia
‘The middle way: The balance between extremes in Buddhist thought’, Fabrizio Musacchio