

## *Progress Over Perfection*

# Episode 1: Breaking Out of Analysis Paralysis

**Host:** Jack Moore

**Guest:** Shashuana Littlejohn

**Series:** Progress Over Perfection

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## *Introduction*

**Jack:** Hi, everyone, and welcome to the Progress Over Perfection podcast. I'm Jack Moore, Managing Partner and co-owner of Evans, Inc. I've spent 30 years in the federal sector. I'm also a dad to two great kids, and to a great wife who I've just started exploring the world with.

**Jack:** This podcast has one goal: to help us all get out of our own way. My guests and I will share stories and real lessons learned that can help you make better decisions faster. And fair warning — we're not afraid to poke a little fun at ourselves. Which starts right now.

**Jack:** Truth be told, it took me a lot longer than I wanted to get this first episode off the ground — which is kind of perfect, because today's topic is breaking out of analysis paralysis and moving forward with 70% confidence instead of waiting for perfect information. Federal leaders out there, you're being asked to modernize, adopt AI,



and deliver mission outcomes, all with fewer people and even tighter timelines than before. Uncertainty isn't the exception anymore. It's the baseline. So the question is: when do you have enough to move forward?

**Jack:** To dig into that, I want to bring in someone I'm glad to have as my first guest. Shashuana Littlejohn is a Senior Principal of Leadership Development at Evans with over 20 years of experience helping leaders and organizations become better versions of themselves. Welcome, Shashuana.

**Shashuana:** Thank you so much for having me, Jack.

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## *What Keeps Leaders Stuck*

**Jack:** So let's set the stage. We've both definitely fallen prey to this analysis paralysis thing, and we've seen it working with clients in both the private and federal sectors. Before we get into specific examples — how would you describe what's actually happening to a leader when they get stuck in that loop?

**Shashuana:** It's really a mindset thing. It's this idea of: do I have enough information? I need to know everything because I need to plan for every contingency — which isn't possible. The best laid plans often have one or two things go unexpectedly awry.

**Shashuana:** I think there's also this idea of perfection. We're very much high-performing employees in these organizations, and we all really want to do well. So this idea of needing all the information before we make a decision is really based on the fear of failure. No one wants to make a mistake. You don't want to be the leader who makes a poor decision, because then your reputation is at stake.

**Jack:** Right. Yeah, that's for sure.

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## *Lesson Learned: The Strategic Plan That Never Launched*

**Jack:** Let's shift to some specific examples — the leader who was able to move through the paralysis, and then the other side where the leader really fell prey to it. Let's start with the lesson learned side. Have you ever seen a situation where a leader waited too long, kept making incremental improvements, and ended up paying for it?

**Shashuana:** Yes, actually — a few times. One story that comes to mind is a leader who wanted to create a strategic plan for their organization. They really were trying to be forward thinking. We spent several months doing data collection — interviewing their teams, understanding how their strategic priorities fit into the overall mission, how it aligned to other priorities within the larger organization, how it connected to the team's values. We did all of this really great legwork and came up with a three-year strategic plan that I think answered the mail on all of their requirements.

**Shashuana:** And when it was time to release it, we spent a considerable amount of time going back and forth, making what I would consider incremental changes — those 1% tweaks. “Oh, I don't know if we like the wording of this.” Or: “We might have a reorg coming down the pike.” Then it was: “Let's have some collaborators review it and give their feedback.” By the time it went through all of those stages and was finally briefed to senior leadership, the organization had changed.

**Shashuana:** Not only did the person who built the strategic plan move to a different team in preparation for potential retirement, but the makeup of the team changed. Some portions moved somewhere else in the organization. The purpose of the strategic plan was to give everyone a blueprint for their daily work — real metrics, real milestones. Because this leader kept picking at it, they ended up with something that was put on a shelf. They never got to use it.

**Jack:** So there's our “you can wait too long” example. You wait too long and the produce spoils — and now you can't use it at all.

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## *Success Story: The Compliance Course Rollout*

**Jack:** So let's talk about the other side. Give me an example where you were able to help a leader get to that 70% or so and really move forward.



**Shashuana:** I'm just going to go on the record and say that 70% is an arbitrary number that I think we wrap ourselves in like a security blanket of sorts. The example that comes to mind involves a compliance course that needed to be delivered to 25,000 employees. Doing business with the federal government, compliance is king — if you don't meet the compliance requirements, you could be barred from doing business with the federal government.

**Shashuana:** I had worked with a cross-functional team, including IT and information security, who would be responsible for ensuring the course would work as expected in the learning management system. We started early, got the right people in the room, got sign-off from the technical teams. We got to the end, did all of the development and internal testing, and we're about six weeks out from launch — right at the holiday season. So the gift I gave the IT team was this course for them to test over the break, so we'd be ready to go in January.

**Shashuana:** I come back from two weeks off, excited. I reach out to the IT team: "How was testing?" Anytime a conversation starts with "actually," it's a problem. And actually — their servers could not handle testing the course. They didn't have the right equipment. A load issue. Something that would have been helpful to know during the entire development of the course.

**Shashuana:** So now we're in a situation where every senior executive overseeing the teams responsible for this course is on alert. One of my superpowers is problem solving. So I asked: "How many employees do you think the system might be able to handle at the same time? Maybe 3,000?" Nobody knew for sure. So I said: "How about we roll it out in batches of 3,000 employees every two weeks, check in after a week, and add more as we go until we get through all 25,000?"

**Shashuana:** We launched. Day one, 3,000 employees — 300 help desk tickets. Many more than the average. We added a daily stand-up to track the issues and develop workarounds. Eventually the tickets went down. Eventually we got all 25,000 people through. Eventually we had a lessons learned meeting.

**Shashuana:** At the end of it all, I received an edible arrangements basket from the team that was supposed to do the testing. My team laughed: why is another team sending you a fruit basket? But what that leader said stuck with me: "We work for the same organization. We want the same things. We want success. And in this interaction, you helped us save face." It also became a springboard — the learning team finally had the business case for upgrading the learning management system, and IT realized they needed more server capacity.

# *Jack's Story: The Developer Who Didn't Wait*

**Jack:** I thought I'd tell a quick story from early in my career — a couple of years ago, let's say. I was working for EDS, helping what's now Citizenship and Immigration Services update their citizenship application processing system. It was a big deal because this user base had never used a mouse before. They'd used dumb terminals. I was on the change management team in the field during the pilot — capturing feedback, understanding concerns.

**Jack:** One user made a pretty simple suggestion. In data entry, at the end of a page, rather than stopping, reaching for the mouse, and clicking to the next page — could she just hit tab and enter? I thought it made sense, but I wasn't empowered to decide that. So I went to the lead developer, Roger, and said, "Here's something a user suggested. It makes sense, and I think it'd show them we're listening."

**Jack:** He said: "Let's do it right now." I was the one feeling the risk — I suggested it, he's going to put it in, and if it breaks something, that's on me. But he said: "Jack, I know the system inside and out. What you're asking me to do is a very simple command. I've got it." And he did.

**Jack:** The lesson: he was comfortable moving forward because he had all the information he really needed — specifically, was this going to break the system? He was at 99%. I thought we were at 20%. It worked out. Once users heard we'd added that functionality, the group that had been in the mock training helped create buy-in for the whole system. It was a great outcome.

**Shashuana:** The beauty of the story you told is that you were in a unique position — being the user, seeing the need — and Roger was the right person to decide whether it was worth the risk. He didn't say "I've got to ask a couple of people." That connects to empowerment. Having people feel like they can take a risk.

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## *Tool 1: Creating a Safe-to-Fail Environment*



**Jack:** Let's shift to some specific tools our listeners can take back to their jobs. The first is the environment — do people feel like it's okay to fail, or to fail forward? What have you seen leaders do to build that type of safe environment?

**Shashuana:** It reminds me of a time at the start of a new year with new priorities. A leader introduced what she called a get out of jail free card. An actual little card, printed up and distributed to everyone on the team. The premise: "No mistake is too big to not be covered by this card." Because in that particular year — as in most years — they were pushing innovation. And innovation requires risk. When you're trying to create something that hasn't been previously created, you are taking a risk.

**Shashuana:** I don't think anyone ever had to turn in that card. And they did some really great things that year — great announcements and achievements across all the teams. That really stuck with me because that leader was essentially saying: I've got your back.

**Jack:** The fact no one ever had to turn it in — in handing out this physical manifestation of 'it's safe to fail,' that created an environment and a mindset. Did you feel the group becoming more innovative after that?

**Shashuana:** I think so. Because at first it always starts as a joke — "I've got my get out of jail free card, ha ha." But then it becomes a part of your thinking, your decision making process. When you're gathering a team and trying to come up with a solution, instead of saying no, you do a "yes, and." What are we willing to try? Who do we need? It also helped us be more collaborative — when we didn't have the answer, we started asking: who might have it? Who might we pull in? It really is providing that top cover: I'm going to empower you to bring your best to bear.

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## *Tool 2: Asking the Right Questions*

**Jack:** Let's talk about another tool. I'm a leader, I'm sitting with a decision and I'm stuck. What's the mental process — or the specific questions — to help figure out if I actually have enough to move?

**Shashuana:** I think about it in stages. If I'm unsure about whether I have enough information, I start with: what information do I need to move forward? Then I go down another level: if I had that information, how might it actually influence my decision? Because sometimes we just want information. As curious creatures, we're always looking for more.

**Shashuana:** If I were to give you a visual, I think about a stoplight. Green, yellow, red. Do you have enough information to go? If yes, go — why are you waiting? If you're unsure, figure out how important that missing information actually is to the overall decision. Leaders often think their choice is between green and red — if it's not all green, it's red. But think about an actual intersection. The light's going from green to yellow. How close am I? Can I make it safely through? If there's a red light camera and cars coming from the other direction, that's a definite red. But if I'm close enough and I can get through safely, I'm going.

**Jack:** There's another way to think about it. Red to me is when I've got a ton of unknown unknowns, or I don't have a mitigation plan for the known unknowns. If I've got a good grasp of the knowns and the known unknowns, and I can think through the unknown unknowns with my team, then I'm good to move forward.

**Shashuana:** You're really asking: what is the worst that can happen if I move forward? In your day-to-day, how many of those decisions are actually that serious? If you can say "I don't have that information, but I don't know if having it would change the decision" — that's really what it's about. It's the fear of failure. How do I quiet that voice that says: what if I don't get this 100% right?

**Jack:** I love the 'what's the worst that can happen.' My executive coach and I have used the polarity map for exactly that. Just coming up with a definition of the worst thing — and you're like, wait, that's not that bad. Very freeing.

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## *Tool 3: Agile Thinking — Build the Bridge as You Walk Across It*

**Jack:** A lot of the change the federal government is dealing with is IT-driven — how to move more quickly, leverage technology, get rid of manual processes. I grew up in more of a waterfall approach: build your requirements, build the system, test the whole thing. Big milestones, but also big fear-of-failure thinking. The way things work now is more agile. How does a leader take that mindset?

**Shashuana:** Think about the destination. You're trying to get to a decision, a desired outcome. And sometimes you've got to be willing to build the bridge as you walk across it. That can be scary because leaders often think they need to see the entire path before they can take a step forward. And sometimes that's just not possible.



**Shashuana:** Being agile is a skill. How can I set myself up for success? Some of the ways you do that: have those great expectation conversations. Say to your team, “I know we’re not going to have 100% of this. Tell me what you do know. Tell me what you don’t. And how does not having that extra 20 or 30% impact the overall success? Is it a red, yellow, green?” If it doesn’t, then that is so freeing.

**Shashuana:** If people get in their heads that they have to give you 100% of the information before you’ll move forward — that’s disempowering. Give us the best information you have access to. Make the case for decision A or decision B. And then we move forward based on what we have.

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## *Closing: One Piece of Advice*

**Jack:** Last question. I’m a listener. I’m going back to work and I’m going to face my next big decision. What’s the one piece of advice you’d give?

**Shashuana:** Asking good questions can be very powerful. Think about it as a funnel. Start with: what information do I need? Can I get it? How quickly? And critically: if I had that information, would it change my decision by 20% — or by 1 or 2%? That usually tells you if you have enough. Because if it’s only going to change things by 1%, is it worth the effort? I’m at 68% and I’m trying to get to 70%. Is the juice worth the squeeze?

**Jack:** I love that. The cost to get that information is often just not worth it. Do a little mitigation strategy and you’re good to go. I also want to thank you for allowing us to have a little fun, and for being my first guest and helping me finally break the seal on this podcast. Those of you listening, please go to [evansinc.com](https://evansinc.com) to learn more about the work Shashuana and I do with the federal government. And challenge yourself to take one of those concrete steps. Until next time.

**Shashuana:** Thank you so much for having me, Jack. And to our listeners — make great decisions.

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*Progress Over Perfection is Evans’ podcast for federal leaders making consequential decisions under uncertainty. New episodes explore how the best program managers, agency leaders, and modernization teams move from analysis to action.*