

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

The Perils of Perfectionism

Ten Action Steps to Modify Behavior

WHAT WE THINK

While striving for excellence and setting high expectations will generally lead to performance success, leadership is often impaired when less-than-perfect outcomes are seen as failures.

The diagnosis of perfectionism often begins with it the recognition that an executive is not succeeding or there are certain barriers to this person's accelerated development. Here are ten action steps which can be used to modify behavior to produce a higher level of productivity.

The CFO of a publicly traded electronics manufacturing corporation had his staff frustrated and discouraged. The final draft of the annual report had been on the CFO's desk for weeks, the printing deadline was rapidly approaching, and he had yet to give his final approval. He had personally rewritten the copy several times, changed font styles, ordered new photography, and recalculated the numbers in the financial section over and over.

The CFO continued to make revisions even after the document had gone to the printer, creating thousands of dollars in press time and paper stock expense. While the annual report was finally distributed and well received by analysts and shareholders, the CFO called his staff into his office to rage over the one typographical error he had found. His final words as they left his office were that in the future he would accept "nothing less than total perfection!"

While striving for excellence and setting high expectations will generally lead to performance success, leadership is often impaired when outcomes

less than perfect are seen as failures. Organizations with perfectionists in positions of authority can be crippled by micromanagement, difficulty with decision making, lack of delegation, procrastination, and risk avoidance. Accordingly, despite the efforts of the perfectionist to improve quality and performance, organizational productivity ultimately suffers.

Is Perfection Necessary?

In certain contexts, elevated levels of precision are requisite. Roles that are highly technical, policy related, financial, or legal require a high attention to detail. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act requires corporate officers in the United States to certify that their company's financial reports are accurate. A measure of exactitude is expected in these situations and less-than-perfect performance could be considered criminal. At lower levels, perfectionism is actually reinforced with highly accurate individuals being rewarded with a rapid acceleration through the ranks. However, at a certain point in the path to leadership, perfectionism becomes a derail.

A Matter of Degree

The difference between healthy striving and perfectionism is often a matter of scale. Setting high standards, using normal anxiety to create energy, accepting helpful criticism, and seeing mistakes as opportunities for growth are positive and beneficial. Conversely, setting standards beyond reach and reason, stagnating due to disappointment, being preoccupied with failure, reacting defensively to criticism, and seeing mistakes as evidence of unworthiness contribute to negative thought patterns.

The Three Types of Perfectionism

Research has identified three types of leadership perfectionism:

- **Self-directed perfectionism** is the self-initiated requirement for one to be perfect.
- **Other-directed perfectionism** is the requirement that others should be perfect.
- **Environmentally pressured perfectionism** is the perception that others require oneself to be perfect.

Each of these behavior patterns carries its own risk for the individual and the organization.

Larry, the chief operating officer of a large healthcare company, was a self-described perfectionist. During a personal-development assessment, he scored very high in self-directed perfectionism, very high in other-directed perfectionism, and in the elevated range for environmentally pressured perfectionism. Business had stagnated over the past two years, a fact for which he held himself solely responsible. With a background in sales, he avoided strategy sessions, preferring to correct business slumps through increased sales quotas, which he calculated himself. When this failed, he blamed himself for his leadership abilities and set even higher goals, creating a cycle of failure. He punctuated the assessment interview with the words, “should,” “must,” and “ought.” Careful probing by the interviewer quickly revealed overdeveloped fears of failure, mistakes, and disapproval.

Executives who require themselves to be perfect are often affected by procrastination and risk avoidance, thereby delaying or evading activities in which they may fail. This can have both interpersonal and business leadership consequences. On an interpersonal level, it may impact the ability to speak honestly and openly without risking retribution, which can lead to dodging confrontation or difficult conversations altogether. On a business level, executives can hesitate in seizing opportunities or adopting innovative strategies because of an elevated belief in the likelihood of failure. Likewise, perfectionist leaders tend to take a more conservative approach to talent selection and promotion.

Individuals who believe that others should be perfect tend to micromanage and have difficulty delegating. High workloads result as the executive personally takes over assignments. Furthermore, other-directed perfectionists do not develop their talent as quickly because they want to maintain control over all of the work. Such leaders may also be labeled as bullies or seen as someone who has difficulty getting along with others due to frustration with their staff’s performance. Successful leaders must know how to delegate, how to maintain balance, and when to step back and let others perform.

Leaders characterized by environmentally pressured perfectionism believe that everyone else requires them to be perfect. They feel pressure from peers, superiors, and their staff. These officers conclude that Wall Street, shareholders, and the marketplace are expecting them to succeed, and anything less than perfection is unacceptable.

Such thinking can be crippling. From a behavioral perspective, it can lead to stress, burnout, low job satisfaction, and poor work/life balance. It affects decision making and has caused errors in judgment and integrity lapses by several perfectionist leaders. These problems can become systemic if each layer of management attempts to meet the perceived high demands of the organizational and operational environment.

Strategies for Overcoming Perfectionism

The diagnosis of perfectionism often begins with the recognition that an

executive is not succeeding or there are certain barriers to this person’s accelerated development. Whether it is identified through the use of an external consultant, internal intervention, or a personal epiphany, there are ten action steps which can be used to modify behavior to produce a higher level of productivity.

1. Increase insight
2. Take inventory of work activity
3. Refocus on strategy
4. Set SMART goals
5. Experiment with standards for success
6. Celebrate wins
7. Confront the fear of failure
8. Learn to learn from mistakes
9. Learn to appreciate imperfection
10. Work on reducing stress

1. Increase Insight

Changing behavior requires an honest dive inward and a thorough self-evaluation. Once certain behaviors are brought to their attention by a mentor, trusted colleague, or through reading materials, perfectionists can begin to recognize themselves in this very distinct pattern of behavior. They may ask a colleague, “This is me, isn’t it?” Others require coaching before they become aware of the patterns. Then they can ask the proper questions, such as, “How is my perfectionism affecting the way I interact with others?” “Is it keeping me from advancement in my career?” “Is it affecting the performance of my business?”

2. Take inventory of Work Activity

Once awareness of the problem has been established, an effective strategy is for the executive to take an inventory

of what he or she is doing during the day. Perfectionists tend to do what they know they are good at, and because there's an overemphasis on being perfect, they can get totally focused on one activity and avoid other important agenda items. The goal of this exercise is to identify what tasks they are focusing on, ask themselves whether they are overinvesting energy on low-impact activities, and reflect on how they can better use their time.

3. Refocus on Strategy

Many technology leaders have a real issue with moving away from the technical and focusing on wider concerns. Such executives, particularly those in upper management positions, must suppress this inclination and refocus on strategic thinking. This often requires a major mindset shift. They need to wind their thinking up a level, let go of those technical activities that had admittedly contributed to their career success thus far, and concentrate on those activities that will yield broader, organizational results.

4. Set SMART Goals

Goal setting is an important discipline for perfectionists to learn. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Perfectionists tend to set very broad, open-ended goals, such as, "I'm going to take this company to the next level." They need to work on setting reachable goals with quantifiable results and predefined ending points.

5. Experiment with Standards for Success

Perfectionists need to recognize that their performance standards are

much higher than others. They should experiment by submitting something which they consider less than perfect and seeing how people respond. As a general guideline, 80% of their efforts will yield sufficient levels of performance, and the remaining 20% will generate diminishing levels of return. The perfectionist leader needs to experiment with different standards of effort. Those who do are surprised by the point at which they can complete one activity and move on to another.

6. Celebrate Wins

Most people get great satisfaction out of completing a job well done. Perfectionists don't get that same sense of fulfillment. The work of their team rarely meets their standards, so in their minds, there are no wins. It is important to recognize when a job is finished or a goal is reached and actively celebrate in some public way. By doing this, the leader acknowledges when objectives are met and when it is acceptable to move on.

7. Confront the Fear of Failure

Fear of failure is an underlying factor of perfectionism. It's important to gain self-insight as to its origin. Perfectionists' fears, like their goals, are often irrational. Creating a series of disaster scenarios around each project can be paralyzing. Instead, asking questions and then challenging one's assumptions can bring fears into perspective: "What's at stake if I fail?" "What's really at stake?" "What's the worst thing that can happen?" "Is that really likely to happen?" "What is the real probable outcome?" This process of continuous assumption checking

enables leaders to challenge their fears directly and create new, rational approaches to thinking about work.

8. Learn to Learn from Mistakes

Perfectionists avoid failure and therefore don't make a lot of mistakes. However, strong leaders are shaped by their failures just as much as their successes. A lack of mistakes can actually affect one's acceleration as a leader. Therefore, as paradoxical as it may seem, perfectionist leaders are encouraged to seek out opportunities to make mistakes and then reflect on what they have learned. Organizations are also encouraged to facilitate this intentional process and ensure leaders have the freedom to fail and learn.

9. Learn to Appreciate Imperfection

What would the world look like with no imperfections? Leaders who understand the value of imperfection are more resilient and better able to deal with change, and are often more attuned to new ideas. Thomas Edison once said, "If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is often a step forward." Perfectionist leaders must learn to appreciate nuances and flaws, and embrace the learning and innovation that accompanies them.

10. Work on Reducing Stress

Perfectionism produces high amounts of stress, so strategies for dealing with the pressure are recommended. A variety of techniques may be used. Executives may also find that the application of the previous nine steps alone may cause reduced levels of stress.

Measures of Success

Working with an executive coach, Larry applied the ten action steps to modify his perfectionist behavior. He spent more time developing strategy and became more efficient in its execution. He spent less time on administrative duties and delegated the setting of sales quotas to his staff. As his credibility among the employees increased dramatically, he found much more satisfaction with his life both in and out of the office. As he focused on developing and coaching his employees, they became more efficient

and the quality of their contributions increased. The company experienced significant business growth, increasing revenue by 35% and expanding into two new markets.

Achieving More by Demanding Less

Executives need to ask themselves where they fall on the continuum of healthy striving to harmful perfectionism. Leaders who pay obsessive attention to detail and have a problematic fear of errors

can jeopardize the efficiency of any organization. Instead of creating an ideal world, perfectionists in the workplace can actually cause a decrease in output and generate miserable conditions not only for themselves but for all those who work around them. Using the ten strategies outlined above, individuals can be made aware of their disruptive behaviors and modify them to achieve more satisfying work habits, enhanced working relationships, and greater innovation, productivity, and agility within their organization.

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