

The Costs of Being a Perfectionist Manager



Our obsession with perfection is increasing: A comprehensive study of perfectionism involving young adults in the UK, U.S., and Canada revealed that perfectionistic tendencies and behaviors have significantly risen — up to 32% over the past three decades. Notable figures such as tennis superstar Serena Williams and prima ballerina Karen Kain have spoken about the insidious pressures to be perfect. They recount a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction despite their success.

The hallmark of perfectionism is not simply the irrational need for flawlessness, but the persistent sense of dissatisfaction even when success is achieved. Worse, it can even hinder success. For instance, university professors with high levels of perfectionism rarely outperform their non-perfectionistic peers.

Growing evidence also suggests that perfectionism at work thwarts people's ability to find meaning in their work, to experience satisfaction with their jobs, and to cultivate work-life balance. Indeed, to thrive in today's competitive and complex organizational realities requires managers to accept that excellent work does not mean it is perfect or faultless. Rather, it is a developmental process, whereby employees are provided the space, time, and patience to improve their craft.

What kind of perfectionistic manager are you?

Perfectionism manifests in different ways that influence people differentially. Managers must first identify the target of their perfectionistic standards. In other words, to whom do you impose your high standards on? Who must engage in painstaking labor to ensure that these expectations are met? Reflecting on these questions is the first step to curb the negative effects of perfectionism. To help you, we present the three common types of perfectionistic personalities.

The self-oriented perfectionist: These managers possess internal beliefs that being perfect and striving for absolute perfection are important outcomes. They frequently have extra-punitive thoughts and negative self-evaluations when their performance falls short of their idealistic standards. While these managers are likely to show high levels of performance attainment, they are also vulnerable to anxiety, rumination, and burnout.

The socially prescribed perfectionist: Some employees might also believe, often inaccurately, that others expect them to be perfect. They believe that respect and acceptance are conditional on their fulfillment of perfectionistic standards that their peers and superiors impose onto them. These misinterpretations of others' expectations create unnecessary pressure that make them susceptible to depression and physical illness, such as headaches, irregular sleep patterns, and eating disturbance.

The other-oriented perfectionist: Finally, the most common type of perfectionism afflicting managers is their tendency to place high importance on others' ability and willingness to strive for perfection. These managers demand the highest performance standards from others and they often evaluate their colleagues stringently. As a result, managers with elevated other-oriented perfectionism sabotage their relationships and reputation in the workplace because of their tendency to incite fear and to display excessive anger and hostility especially when others fail to meet their performance expectations.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Perfectionism

If you recognize yourself or your employees in the above scenarios, you are not alone, nor does it mean that you are doomed as a manager. Organizational research on perfectionism is starting to provide new insights and practical evidence-based steps for managers and their network to breaking free from their perfectionistic compulsions. Fortunately, perfectionists are likely to be goal-focused and action-oriented and these strategies are aimed at helping them recalibrate their expectations. Based on our collective experience studying effective leadership strategies as well as our expertise on perfectionism across workplaces, we offer the following strategies to help you manage your perfectionism.

Design the right goals.

One of the most useful things perfectionists, and those who work with them, can do is to design goals to be attainable yet challenging. This can support employees' efficiency and sustain their motivation to succeed. For perfectionistic managers, high performance expectations may be set for short-duration projects that require maximum effort (e.g., solving problems, addressing crises situations).

Keep in mind, however, that progress is more important than perfection. Initial successes in these goals can be leveraged to encourage the accomplishment of important tasks while sustaining their employees' enthusiasm. Acknowledging small wins can reinforce the rewards of progress.

Recognize failure as part of the process.

Managers should make a deliberate effort to recognize that failures and mistakes are ubiquitous aspects of the work process. Doing so would encourage them to grant their employees the flexibility to treat mistakes as learning opportunities.

Perfectionistic managers must recognize that intolerance of mistakes and failures can spoil creativity. Employees who are reprimanded from taking risks and making mistakes often dwell on their failures, leading them to be too exhausted to produce insightful and novel work. This would further enable employees to broaden their perspectives, to find novel solutions to problems, and to discover new ways of doing things.

Cultivating mindfulness.

Practicing mindfulness may especially benefit perfectionistic managers. It encourages self-compassion by preventing the formation of self-critical and catastrophic thinking when their perfectionistic standards are threatened.

Mindfulness may help perfectionists to slow down and regulate emotions. For example, research shows that musicians with perfectionistic tendencies who meditate at least once a week are better at managing music performance anxiety. Further evidence reports that perfectionistic workers who completed a six-week mindfulness-based bibliotherapy intervention experienced less stress and negative emotions.

Using pep talks.

Counseling psychologists endorse positive self-talks to overcome hypercritical thoughts, and it can be worthwhile for people to develop a set of mantras to help themselves and others handle perfectionism. For example, a self-oriented perfectionist might need to tell themselves: "Wanting to be perfect is impossible and exhausting for me. There is no reason for me to spend a lot of time on everything. I must let myself relax if I want to carry on in the long term." Managers with employees exhibiting self-oriented perfectionism may say, "You do not always have to work alone. You can always reach

out to me when you get stuck at a task. Great work is not achieved by one person overnight.”

We’ve found similar responses for the other types of perfectionists, too. Managers with socially prescribed perfectionism might need to tell themselves: “My contributions are sufficient. No one will think of me any less just because of a tiny error I made.” If you find yourself working with a staff member who displays socially prescribed perfectionism, it may be worth reminding them that their work success and even failures do not define them. You may say, “You do not have to prove yourself to us. We have always admired your work and dedication. Your contributions are valued as long as you tried your hardest.”

Finally, managers with other-oriented perfectionism can tell themselves: “I don’t have to push people to get things done my way. They are here because they are capable in their own right.” As a manager of an employee who expects perfection from their colleagues, you might say: “You will learn tremendously from others when you allow them to work at their own pace and handle failures together. People have a way of surpassing even your own expectations.”

Such pep talks boost positive evaluations of the self and others, and also address perfectionists’ irrational and nagging beliefs that a person’s worth is tied to their accomplishments.

Fostering positive interpersonal relationships.

At its core, perfectionists strive to gain others’ validation. While perfectionism predisposes individuals to more conflict with others, studies demonstrate that support from peers buffer the negative consequences of perfectionism. For example, perfectionistic managers with access to social support from family and friends cope better in stressful situations because of the advice, esteem, and encouragement they receive.

To develop more positive social experiences, perfectionists need to remember that not all social interactions are about problem-solving and winning — rather, they need to focus on empathy instead of competing with others and giving unsolicited advice. One study suggests that perfectionists who channel their competitive spirits into helping others finish their work enable them to foster positive interactions with others. The ensuing positive social experiences with peers can help reduce anxiety, depression, and overall stress arising from perfectionistic endeavors. This will further enhance their social skills and help them see others as collaborators instead of rivals.

Managing emotions.

Managers who consistently demand perfection from their subordinates may unknowingly express intense anger, irritability, and frustration. As such, they might

benefit from developing emotions-based strategies to communicate their high performance standards in a sensitive and empathic manner.

In emotionally charged situations, managers can avoid overreacting by stepping back from the situation and reframing the situation using a more positive lens. For example, when a subordinate falls short of their performance goals, perfectionistic managers can highlight the new knowledge, skills, and experience that the subordinate has gained. Reframing performance in this manner instead of absolute failures can direct subordinates to focus on improving future performance.

Finally, they can also dampen negative emotions such as frustration and dissatisfaction by using humor when their perfectionistic standards are threatened. As Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys recounted, “I was a real perfectionist, and the guys respected that. But we always used humor to lighten the load.”

Key Takeaway: Reconsider Work that Is Good Enough.

Intense competition and low tolerance for errors in modern workplaces have forced managers to set exceedingly demanding performance standards. Although some may claim that combining high performance expectations with rigid patterns of evaluations may raise performance, the infatuation with perfection can derail engagement, relationships, and satisfaction with work and life. Ultimately, we tend to perform better at work — and can even be happier — when we are consistently “good enough” instead of sporadically perfect.

Written by: Anna Carmella G. Ocampo, Ju Gu, and Mariano Heyden
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