

The Perils of Perfectionism

By Angela C. Gonzalez

I believe that everyone really wants to do a good job. However, wanting to do a good job and feeling like everything has to be perfect are two different things. I know from personal experience how hard it can be to get some perspective on this, especially with the driving pace of our work and personal lives.

The differentiator is that the perfectionist is driven to get it right in everything they do. They have a penchant for setting extremely high standards and being displeased with anything less. The perfectionist expends a great deal of time and energy trying to avoid making mistakes, trying to make everything perfect. Perfectionism can also be disguised as procrastination, i.e., failing to follow through until every action is just right.

In addition, the perfectionist will invest a great deal of energy in fixing other people's mistakes. Their standard of perfection is very specific and often applies to everybody and everything around them. There is no room for error.

Nearly everyone has been on the receiving end of the expectations of a perfectionist. The expected perfection is not only costly and time consuming, but diverts resources and energy away from important matters. Often leaving people feeling burned out, resentful, distrustful, and micro-managed, which in turn affects job satisfaction, commitment, and motivation.

The perfectionist leader will defend their behavior by saying, "The customer demands perfection" or "we look bad when things are not perfect." Not realizing that if everything has to be perfect, then everything has the same priority; thus, nothing has a priority and the individuals and the company's ability to achieve results are less than optimal. While quality is important, perfectionism can be deadly; especially when you recognize how much damage it can do to one's piece of mind, and one's relationships with others.

Do you have a streak of the perfectionist in you?

- Do you redo your own and the work others until it is perfect?
- Have you every said "It's easier to just do it myself"?
- Can things only be done one way, and do you feel you are the only one who can "do it right"?
- Do you insist that others do things the way you would do them?
- Do you resist changing your standards or methods?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are not alone. However, while you may laugh and joke about perfectionism, or explain it away; ask yourself a few more questions:

- How often do I do this?
- What has to be perfect? Why?
- Why do I insist on doing it my way?
- How does my insistence on perfection affect my relationships with others?
- How does it affect my own stress levels and those of others?
- Does perfectionism bring you joy, happiness, peace, delight, nourishment, fun, or enjoyment?

If you have perfectionist tendencies, here are some actions you could take:

- *Establish priorities. Determine what is most important and focus your drive for excellence on those high priority items. This means learning to let go of those things that are not as important.*
- *Establish criteria for acceptable and excellent performance in a given situation. Then apply those standards for the desired outcomes, before the tasks are initiated or delegated.*
- *Set time limits for writing memos and letters, and tasks in general. This way you won't spend unnecessary time "perfecting" the message.*
- *Force yourself to refrain from "correcting" style changes in the work of others.*
- *When reviewing something, ask yourself, "Does my change really matter in the big picture?" Will it really matter 3 years from now?"*
- *Be open to outcomes, not attached to them. Learn to be detached from situations, and safely allow people to learn from their own mistakes.*
- *Give others credit for the effort involved without correcting their work.*
- *Remember that sometimes, 80% is good enough.*

Being *agile*, *efficient*, and *productive* are the hallmarks of success in business. The reality of the situation is that, there is never enough time to complete a task perfectly. However, while you may not do things perfectly, you can still do excellent work.