

Why perfectionism at work does not pay

In the first of a series of articles looking at emotions that are likely to be addressed in coaching, **Gladeana McMahon** and **Adrienne Rosen** focus on perfectionism

Seeking to attain a worthwhile goal gives meaning and value. However, perfectionism places unrealistic demands on, and produces debilitating emotional and practical outcomes for, both the individual and for the organisation as a whole (Rice, Vergara, Aldea, 2004).

Perfectionism is not the healthy pursuit of excellence. There are big differences between perfectionists and those who are seen as healthy achievers (Anthony, Swinson, 1998).

Those who strive for excellence in a healthy way take pleasure in meeting high standards. Perfectionists are full of anxiety and fear of disapproval and rejection. These emotional reactions are linked to the stress response, experienced when an individual is presented with situations that he or she sees as having a threat attached to them (Palmer, Cooper, 2007).

Ways in which perfectionism can manifest itself

There are a number of ways in which perfectionism can manifest itself.

Aggressive behaviour

It is not uncommon for organisations to label someone as having 'behavioural issues' or to state that

the individual does not '*suffer fools gladly*' (Donkin, Dobson, 2006). In many cases, aggressive behaviour is an external sign of a perfectionist thinking style. When an individual places unrealistic pressure on himself, he is likely to place that same pressure on others. Making a mistake is erroneously linked to a sense that a mistake makes a person of less worth, and the individual will do whatever it takes to

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ensure a mistake does not happen (Neenan, Dryden, 2006).

In some instances, aggressive behaviour is a by-product of the perfectionist's fear of getting a task wrong and the unwitting individual on the receiving end is simply in the 'wrong place at the wrong time'. In other instances, it is because the perfectionist fears that the other person may not take the task as seriously as he believes he should. In such cases, the perfec-

tionist thinks the only way to avoid this is to ensure the recipient is left in no doubt as to the seriousness of what has to be achieved.

Controlling behaviour

Perfectionists are often termed 'control freaks', as they fear letting anyone else do anything without their supervision. A perfectionist believes there is only one way of doing something – the exact way *he* would tackle it. When a perfectionist does not feel in control, allowing someone to tackle a task in his own way becomes extremely anxiety-provoking (Bamber, 2006). The perfectionist feels that he will be judged by whether the task is completed adequately, so it is not easy to give up control.

Procrastination

Perfectionism may also manifest itself through the act of procrastination. Every piece of work is given the same importance, whether it is a major project or a simple email response. If an individual fears ridicule and failure, he is likely to spend more time and energy than is necessary on individual tasks. People procrastinate in many ways, for example by putting off a task until the last minute. This allows the individual to avoid the anxiety-provoking situ-

Perfectionist	Healthy achiever
Sets unrealistic standards which are unlikely to ever be attained	Sets high standards which will stretch the individual
Can never be satisfied as they can never attain the desired outcome	Tends to enjoy the process as well as the end product
Becomes stressed and unhappy when faced with failure and disappointment	Learns from failure and sees it as part of life, so feels disappointment but moves on quickly
Is constantly preoccupied with fear of failure and disapproval that is emotionally draining	Experiences concerns about failure and disapproval but not in a way that drains energy or is emotionally distressing
Links mistakes with a lack of self-worth and ability	Treats mistakes as part of a life-long learning process
Tends to become defensive and emotional when faced with an error	Sees feedback as constructive and something to learn from

Figure 1 Perfectionist versus healthy achiever attitudes

ation for as long as possible and also enables him, if the piece of work falls short, to blame it on leaving it to the last minute rather than on his own personal incompetence.

There is a type of perfectionist who is seen as slow, lazy and incompetent. These individuals labour over every word and seem to take ages to complete a task. They are so concerned with ensuring the final product is correct that they would rather endure the anxiety of failing to meet a deadline than handing in what they see as inferior work.

Avoidance of threatening situations

As perfectionists are concerned with getting things right and being seen as competent, this can lead to them avoiding those situations they find threatening. If asked to take on a new project or role, they may feel they will fail because they do not have all the skills.

The difference between perfectionists and healthy achievers

The healthy achiever, as outlined in Figure 1 above, is likely to relish the chance of something new, even if they are concerned about whether they will be up to the task.

Healthy achievers do not necessarily like to fail but do not find the idea of failing damages their sense of achievement or self-esteem. A healthy achiever will

take risks, try new things, recognise that delegation is an essential part of corporate life, and does not experience the high degree of anxiety that the perfectionist does.

Cognitive psychology suggests that perfectionism and the ways in which it manifests itself are linked with anxiety (Kennerley, 1997). Perfectionists live with high levels of anxiety that they are constantly seeking to mitigate through avoiding failure and seeking perfection and the approval of others.

Perfectionists tend to engage in what is called ‘all or nothing’ thinking, in which every task that is set, however small, is seen in terms of success or failure (Padesky, Greenberger, 1995).

This type of thinking leaves no room for human error, for learning through mistakes or for getting some of the process, if not all of it, right. Everything is evaluated in terms of ‘pass or fail’ or ‘win or lose’.

Healthy achievers tend to have a more flexible thinking style, seeing the various shades of grey that exist and the many factors that can

contribute to, or hinder, a successful outcome regardless of individual effort (McMahon, 2006). (See Figure 2 below.)

Is there a place for perfectionism in successful senior leadership?

Individuals are not the only ones who do not benefit from perfectionism. It is difficult to foster a culture of creativity, personal responsibility and empowerment alongside perfectionist thinking.

Managers can find perfectionists hard to manage, colleagues can find them difficult to work with, and subordinates can be at the mercy of a perfectionist manager.

A recent study undertaken by Fairplace in conjunction with Cass Business School (Dobson, 2007) tends to suggest that perfectionist managers are unlikely to make good leaders. The research involved interviewing 54 managers across the financial services, manufacturing and not-for-profit sectors using the repertory grid technique. It led to the creation of a 360° tool (Fairplace Talent Tracker 360) that has been used as part of leadership, talent and development programmes for the past two years. Dr Dobson analysed the data from the 360° tool, which involved 1,852 respondents from more than 70 organisations. Thirty-two per cent of the respondents were senior managers and above (Dobson, 2008).

The research highlighted that those executives who are seen as successful leaders are also seen as open-minded, courageous, have personal impact, empower others, build strong teams and are adaptable. An internal validation of the

Figure 2 Perfectionist thinking versus healthy achiever thinking

Perfectionist thinking	Healthy achiever thinking
“If I make a mistake, it is awful and I have done a bad job”	“If I make a mistake, it is not the end of the world. I can always learn from it and do better next time”
“If I make an error, people will think badly of me and I will seem incompetent”	“Everyone makes mistakes and there is nothing to be ashamed of. I did my best”
“No-one wins any prizes for coming second”	“How many people can say they came second? I can always try again”

Perfectionism is not the healthy pursuit of excellence



Likely to lead to successful leadership	Likely to derail a leader
"Allow themselves to be vulnerable and show human frailty"	"Tries to be superhuman and disguise vulnerability"
"Genuine: admits difficulties, recognises fallibility"	"Less genuine"
"Worries about the benefit of being right"	"Worries about being right"

question "you want to go the extra mile for them" showed that the most significant factors were: 'trusted', 'presence', 'empowers', 'drive and energy' and 'personable' above the factor of 'completer finisher'.

Fairplace has carried out subsequent consultancy work in the private and public sector. Interviews with senior leaders have demonstrated that what distinguishes successful leaders is the ability to be vulnerable, admit mistakes and not to worry about always being right. (See Figure 3 above.)

It can be particularly hard for

Figure 3
Being open minded and adaptable: Factors attributed to successful leadership

Figure 4
How perfectionism may impede the ability to shape and create the future

leaders whose earlier rise has emphasised making the right decision. An engineer guaranteeing a ship is safe cannot afford to make a mistake, nor can a doctor prescrib-

Likely to lead to successful leadership	Likely to derail a leader
"Relishes new things"	"Worries about new things, fears failure"
"Has vision, can see a path forward"	"Technocrat, tied up in daily operational issues"
"Takes some risks, accepts there may be some failures and that some decisions may not work"	"Risk-averse, does not ever want to fail"
"Calculated risk-taker: fear of failure but not at the forefront"	"Lacks ability to execute risk through fear of failure"
"Willing to fail, knows it won't destroy them"	"Fear of failure"

ing a drug or an engineer building a bridge. But this is the challenge of the transition into leadership, as the skill then becomes one of retaining the elements needed to still make good decisions, but recognising that the new task is to achieve results through others (Dobson, 2008).

Another essential leadership skill displayed by successful executives is the ability to create and shape a future for the organisation. This involves thinking creatively, pushing the boundaries and reflecting broadly. The use of the repertory grid enables us to understand the negative behaviours; often it is felt that leaders fail to think creatively due to a fear of failure. (See Figure 4 below.)

Senior leaders also have a significant role to play in motivating and inspiring others. Relevant here are the items of empowering others, delegating, listening and openness to challenge. Perfectionist tendencies may impede a leader in this sphere. (See Figure 5 opposite.)

Additional tools for identifying perfectionism

The Hogan Development Scale (HDS) is a psychometric tool designed to assess 11 common dysfunctional dispositions. This tool is often used as part of senior assessment, alongside an additional tool to look at personal preferences (Hogan, 2007). Hogan believes that the dispositions are:

- caused by people's distorted beliefs about how others will treat them;
- negatively influence people's careers and life satisfactions.

These behaviours are normally cloaked by elements of the individual's social skills. The dysfunctional behaviours surface when people are under pressure, upset or so preoccupied that they are not as concerned as usual about the impression they make.

The HDS is based on research into management derailment and identifies 11 patterns of dysfunctional interpersonal leadership behaviour. These 'dark side' tendencies erode trust, loyalty and enthusiasm and are of particular concern in relation to supervisory, managerial and leadership roles. Bosses who alienate colleagues and subordinates undermine the commitment and effectiveness of the workforce with consequences for productivity, retention and the bottom line.

The diligent perfectionist

The diligent perfectionist has the tendency to be unusually conscientious, orderly and attentive to detail. People with high scores on this scale tend to be organised, careful and hard working. Nonetheless, others may find them hard to work with because they can also be fussy, critical and stubborn about their work. They may create more stress for themselves by trying to do too much, by not delegating and by trying to do every task equally well (Knights, Kennedy, 2007).

In addition, the OPQ is commonly used as part of talent assessment and development centres. It is the controlling scale that may be of significant interest with respect to the debate on the danger of perfectionism. Low-controlling scorers are happy to let others take charge, dislike telling people what to do and are unlikely to take the lead. High-scorers like to be in charge, take the lead, tell others what to do and take control (Dulewicz, Herber, 1999).

We may infer that, if perfectionism relates to an overly high need for control, there is a danger that

Likely to lead to successful leadership	Likely to derail a leader
"Supports and encourages people to make own decisions – empowers others"	"Controlling, does not empower others"
"Good delegators"	"Sometimes finds delegation difficult, cannot admit that he is not the best at doing something"
"Interested in others' opinions, asks for views, questions before deciding"	"Not interested in others' opinions, believes he alone knows the best way"
"Willing to be challenged by those they respect"	"Unwilling to be challenged"

subordinates, peers and managers may perceive this to affect the ability to adopt a participatory style of management.

Can a perfectionist change?

Perfectionists can be helped to become healthy achievers. Currently, cognitive behavioural coaching is a model that has demonstrated most success in this arena. This is not surprising, given that it has its roots in the skills and strategies of cognitive behaviour therapy, one of the most well-researched therapeutic approaches. Cognitive behavioural coaching uses the skills of cognitive and behavioural psychology to identify self-defeating thinking patterns, and then helps people replace these with self-enhancing thinking through a series of structured exercises (McMahon, 2007).

As individuals change the way they perceive situations, recognising that there is no threat other than the one they create, stress levels decrease, creativity and risk-taking increases, and the ability to empower and manage others also increases. Communication style becomes more inclusive and delegation increases.

Attaining a high standard and seeking to do well equate to success, whereas perfectionism costs time, energy and money. Perhaps it is not so much a case of being perfect as just doing a good job. ■

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Figure 5
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