

# Is there a place for perfectionism in successful leadership?

By Gladeana McMahon and Adrienne Rosen, October, 2008

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)

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.

CEDAR Talent Management 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 1)

It can be particularly hard for leaders whose earlier rise has emphasised

*“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)

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. Often it is felt that leaders fail to think creatively due to a fear of failure. (See Figure 2)

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 3)

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

**Figure 1**  
Being open minded and adaptable: Factors attributed to successful 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 CEDAR Talent Management in conjunction with Cass Business School (Dobson, 2007\*) tends to suggest that *perfectionist managers are unlikely to make good leaders.*

making the right decision. An engineer guaranteeing a ship is safe cannot afford to make a mistake, nor can a doctor prescribing a drug or an engineer building a bridge. But this is the challenge of the transition into leadership, as the

**Figure 2**  
How perfectionism may impede the ability to shape and create the future

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”
“Taken 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”

**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

*“Attaining a high standard and seeking to do well equate to success, however perfectionism costs time, energy and money. Perhaps it is not so much a case of being perfect as being a healthy achiever.”*

**About the Research:**

A recent study undertaken by CEDAR Talent Management 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

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“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 opinion, asks for views, questions before deciding”	“Not interested in others opinions, believes he alone knows best way”
“Willing to be challenged by those they respect”	“Unwilling to be challenged”

**Figure 3**  
Factors relating to motivating and inspiring

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.

**About the Authors:**

**Gladeana McMahon** is vice president and fellow of the Association for Coaching, Director of Professional Coaching Standards at CEDAR Talent Management and co-director for the Centre for Coaching.

**Adrienne Rosen** is head of talent identification and assessment at CEDAR Talent Management. They can be contacted on +44 (0)207 204 6950 or at info@cedar-tm.com

not-for-profit sectors using the repertory grid technique. It led to the creation of a 360° tool (CEDAR Talent Management 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).

**References-**

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