



Balancing Perfectionism in the Workplace

Don't get me wrong, there are times that projects and skill sets should absolutely be perfect. If I'm flying over the Atlantic Ocean, I want a perfect flight, landing, and a pilot that doesn't cut corners. If I am scheduled for brain surgery, I would hope for no less than an intricately precise surgical procedure with no mistakes. If you were to go see a concert pianist that you appreciate, you expect to hear the sounds of a perfectly tuned piano.

My point is that there are times for exactness in the workplace when specifications and protocols are met without apology. In fact, every industry requires it at one level or another.

My wife and I were having a picture framed the other day. The clerk at the store doing the framing stated that he was a perfectionist. He saw errors with the final project my eye would have never caught. He took great pride in his work and wouldn't let anything out of his store that wasn't "perfect." I must admit the process was slow, but exact. The final product is beautiful. Such is the perfectionist!

My interest with this newsletter, however, is to address the worker who has perfectionistic tendencies and expectations that need to be balanced for their peace of mind as well as those who work around them.

I once heard a radio interview with a man who authored a book about living with a neat nick. He previously was almost intolerable to live with until he made some necessary changes. I remember him saying that his bar for perfectionistic cleanliness and order was so high that his family could never hit the bar.

When asked how he made the necessary changes, he said he simply lowered the bar for everyone else in his family. If a domestic project needed to be done to his expectations he would do it himself. The family was relieved and his expectations were met the exact the way he wanted.



Balancing Perfectionism in the Workplace

Symptoms of the Perfectionist

Usually those with perfectionistic tendencies tend to be very hard working, loyal, and ambitious people. They have a hard time settling for substandard work from themselves or anyone else. They are focused, put their whole heart and soul into everything they touch and do, and have an eye for what is correct.

I fondly refer to them as those who are on a lifelong self-improvement program, which works for them. The only problem is they want everyone else to be on their program and when others are not interested, the perfectionists feel frustrated.



A friend of mine has a 6-year-old son that has perfectionistic standards like his father. On one occasion, he was being bullied by a classmate in the school bathroom. Rather than fighting back or reporting it to the teacher, he said to the bully, "You are not making good choices with your life." This little boy was even shocked that the bully didn't want to be on a lifelong self-improvement program!

Another curious characteristic is that when they look at a project, report, or written document, they see what's wrong with it before they see what is right (and can't help it). For example, when I am doing a presentation in PowerPoint and one word is misspelled or punctuation is out of place, they see it immediately and don't feel rested until it's corrected. Their eye for what is correct and exact is painfully uncanny.

We find a lot of perfectionists in HR and have found that they are the true watchdogs of any organization. Nothing gets by them, there are no short cuts, and

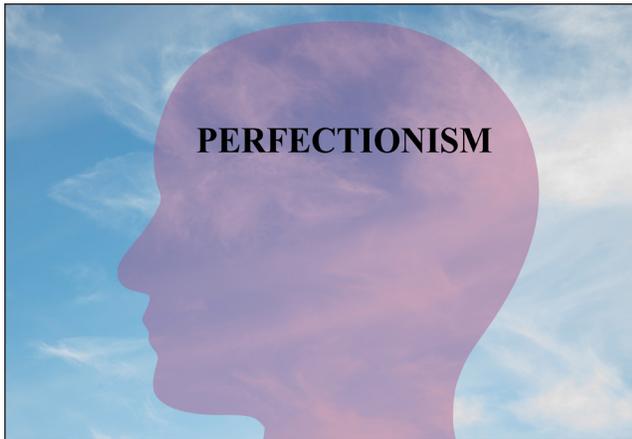
everyone has to play by the rules. Frequently, they are perceived to jam up the process and slow things down at work because they have to be sure that all the I's are dotted and T's are crossed.

Below I've listed some ideas and action points in order to better understand those who live on this higher plane of expectations:

Tips on Understanding and Working with the Perfectionist

- *Give prior notice to them if there is a change:* Their day is so synchronized that an abrupt change can take them off schedule and things can unravel quickly. So give them a heads up, if possible, about potential upcoming changes.
- *Inform them if the project is running late:* Your word is everything to them, so if you are running behind the deadline give them the courtesy of an explanation and they'll do much better.
- *Expect corrections:* The motivation behind their assessments of one's work is betterment. Try not to over personalize their suggestions or comments. They strive for excellence.
- *Don't expect them to compromise on the quality of their work:* If things need to be done quickly or a deadline is moved up, they will put it off until they can do it correctly. The perfectionist actually feels violated when they perceive that the quality of their work is forced to be compromised.
- *Ask them if it's a good time to talk:* This was a real eye-opener to me since I'm married to somewhat of a perfectionist. As a communicator, I always feel it is a good time to talk, but people that are ultra-focused on projects do better with quiet and little interruptions.
- *Verbally appreciate the quality and care of their work:* Although they rarely ask for verbal kudos, you will know it when they feel underappreciated!

Balancing Perfectionism in the Workplace



I think it's also important to know for those who live and work with perfectionists that, at times, they are their worst enemy and highest critic. They are constantly working over in their minds how they could have handled the situation better that day, changed the wording in a conversation, or how they can better strategize a way to reduce the unfinished work that awaits them.

In other words, you never have to lay a guilt trip on a perfectionist—they do fine on their own!

With that in mind, I have some self-improvement suggestions for the perfectionist reading this newsletter. These offered ideas are motivated by wanting to help you to sharpen your skills and impact in the workplace at an even higher level:

A Self-Improvement Plan for the Perfectionist

- *Be more accepting:* Accept the fact that not everyone feels a need to function at the same level you do.

- *Value relationships over performance:* Take a break. Pull away from the monitor. We know you are busy. Remember what and who is most important.
- *Trust others and delegate:* You may feel that “no one can do it as good as you,” but you need help with tasks. If you continue to over commit, you will continue to be exhausted and become irritable with those closest to you.
- *Verbally acknowledge what is working first:* As mentioned earlier, you will see what is wrong before what is right. That's fine; just don't present it that way. Look for the good first, then point out the necessary corrections.

The Key to Balancing Perfectionism

Flexibility: There is not a more important concept for the perfectionist than flexibility. In San Francisco, the architects and structural engineers designed the highest buildings in the 40's and 50's with the hardest and strongest steel they could use. The only problem was, when the earthquakes hit, the damage was irreparable. However, these days when a 110-story building is erected, it's with 20 feet of sway at the top and earthquakes don't bring them down. The point is, the least flexible you are as a perfectionist, the faster you fall apart.

The workplace can't survive without the standards, work ethic, and keen eye of the perfectionist. But if you can bend, trust, and lower your bar a bit for your co-workers, I guarantee a less stressful work environment for everyone.



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.