

Are You a Recovering Perfectionist?

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I am! I'll admit it right up front. There's no use denying, ignoring, or pretending otherwise.

If you are a recovering perfectionist, too, we can commiserate!

If you're not a perfectionist, I bet you know one--maybe in your family, perhaps a neighbor, maybe a co-worker. On the surface, you'd think the word should be a compliment. I mean, what's so wrong with wanting to do really good work? Yet when people call you a perfectionist, don't you usually detect some sarcastic or other denouncing tone in their voice?

My articles frequently encourage individuals and organizations to strive for excellence. I'm so committed to that concept, yet I do exhibit perfectionist tendencies at times. So, I decided to explore the distinctions between the two concepts.

I admit that some individuals who strive for excellence can easily become obsessive, drifting from a very desirable characteristic onto a perverse path of anguish and pain--for themselves and others!

Perfection is not achievable, of course. Even perfectionists will agree to that. But they strive for the impossible anyway, creating distress for themselves and the people close to them.

People who strive for excellence, on the other hand, accept the possible. Listen to their language and you'll hear things like: "I desire...", "I choose to...", and "Next time, I would like..." If you strive for excellence, you realize there are choices to be made in terms of time allocated, energy applied, and resources consumed. Resilience is required when an unintended mistake rears its ugly head!

Listen to a perfectionist talk, however, and you may hear words grunted through gritted teeth: "I have to...", "I should...", and "Somehow, we must..." Those "should" and "have to" statements reveal the perfectionist. If you strive for perfection, you tend to think and act as if you somehow can master and control everything that happens! And you beat yourself when something goes wrong.

In striving for excellence, leaders tend to focus on the process by which results are generated, not the adequacy or inadequacy of the current outcome. They know that improving the method will ultimately lead to better results. For this reason, there is less stress. You'll usually hear expressions of support conveyed as a request or a desire: "Would you be willing to...?" or "Next time, would it be possible to...?" or "Will you think collaboratively with me about what else we might do?"

Mistakes or failures to the perfectionist are a clear confirmation that "I'm not good enough." Sometimes, when the perfectionist engages with others, the implication is often that "you're not good enough, either!"

In contrast, an individual or organization seeking excellence finds that every mistake, failure, or inadequacy is an opportunity to learn and improve. There's a desire to seek out the cause of the insufficiency and determine how a similar situation might be prevented or minimized in the future.

Striving for perfection is demoralizing, resulting in disappointment, frustration, and personal condemnation. If results happen to be good, perfectionists are driven to eliminate any remaining deficiency, rarely allowing feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction, either in their own or anyone else's performance. Rejoicing is rare for a perfectionist. Why? Perhaps a person focused on perfection realizes that the next defect is inevitable, and likely will occur much too soon!

Striving for excellence, on the other hand, motivates everyone toward greater accomplishment, personal acceptance, and celebration. Achievers make strenuous efforts and enjoy the journey as well as the thrill of victory. Even when their best efforts fall short, they acknowledge that this particular attempt was worthwhile, and they recommit to improving the effort next time.

A difference between perfectionists and those who value excellence is associated with the fear of failure. All of us fear failure to some degree. We all want to look good to those around us, and we'll go to great lengths to avoid looking bad. And we don't like being forced out of our comfort zones.

Yet progress and growth require that we leave behind what already exists. To fulfill its purpose, a ship must leave the shore, losing sight of its safe harbor and facing the dangers of the stormy seas.

Growth requires taking risks. Perfectionists want to be totally sure they can accomplish the objective before they try. Those who seek excellence know there is something to be learned from every initiative, both those that succeed and those that fall short of expectations.

I confess that I sometimes hesitate to take calculated risks. Yet I admire those who can genuinely live with the consequences of their actions, whatever they may be, learning from the journey when results are poorer than had been desired.

As with any addiction, I know that perfectionism's pull on me is ever present, and I just might slip at any time. Still, I now consciously focus on and strive for excellence.

Have I touched a nerve with this column? If so, would you let me know? Send an e-mail to the address below. I'd love to hear about your victories over perfectionism and your progress toward excellence.

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Added in 2021:

"Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

This quote is attributed to Vince Lombardi (1913-1970), who was a professional football coach. He is best remembered for coaching the Green Bay Packers from 1959 to 1967. He is considered by many to be the best football coach in history, leading the team to five National Football League championships in seven years, three of them consecutively. His team won the first two Super Bowls at the end of the 1966 and 1967 seasons. The Super Bowl trophy was named in his honor in 1970, after his induction into the Professional Football Hall of Fame and his death from cancer.

Sadly, Lombardi's quote is sometimes used by perfectionists to justify their behaviors. I believe chasing excellence directly can be just as (and maybe more) effective than chasing perfection.

Later, Vince Lombardi later said, "The greatest accomplishment is not in never failing, but in rising again after you fail." Lombardi was a realist, not a perfectionist! Yes, he drove for excellence!

Dennis Hooper