

Practically Perfect: When and Why Perfectionism Pays Off and Backfires

Jeff Szymanski, PhD
Executive Director
International OCD Foundation

Perfectionism Paradox

“You’re such a perfectionist”

- ▶ Are you supposed to feel insulted or flattered when you hear this comment?
- ▶ Is someone saying that you are detail-oriented, organized, and driven to excel? Or that you are controlling, rigid, and self-defeating?
- ▶ Is your perfectionism a good thing or does it get in your way?

Perfectionism Paradox

- ▶ If your intentions are good (wanting to excel) and the outcomes you want are reasonable (to feel competent and satisfied), why would your perfectionism backfire and result in unhappiness and unwanted results?
- ▶ Also, how is it that the exact same strategy can work in one instance but not work in another?
 - ▶ For example, concern about mistakes can make you detail-oriented and a valuable asset at work—or it can make you controlling, anxious, and a procrastinator.

The Challenge of Perfectionism

- ▶ Many people consider their perfectionism to be one of their most valuable attributes and critical for success in achieving one’s life goals.
- ▶ Advice aimed at trying to stop you from being a perfectionist is interpreted as “lower the bar”.
- ▶ In other words, people like their perfectionism even when they know it doesn’t work for them.

What I Have Learned

- ▶ Separate healthy from unhealthy perfectionism
- ▶ Help each person identify their own perfectionism profile
- ▶ Differentiate intention, strategy and outcome
- ▶ Differentiate persistence from perseverance
- ▶ How to counter the “seductions” of perfectionism

Perfectionism: Healthy Versus Unhealthy

- ▶ Learn to differentiate healthy from unhealthy perfectionism:
 - ▶ When working for you, perfectionism encourages you to achieve high but reasonable standards that lead to feelings of satisfaction and increased self-esteem, that is, healthy perfectionism.
- ▶ Unhealthy perfectionism, on the other hand, compels you to strive to meet unrealistically high expectations and can be driven by a fear of failure and disappointing others.

Types of Perfectionism

- ▶ Let's back up...
- ▶ What exactly is it that we are referring to when we are talking about perfectionism?

Types of Perfectionism

Absence of mistakes or flaws

We often consider something to be “perfect” when we can no longer find any errors, mistakes or flaws.

Types of Perfectionism

Personal Standards

Sometimes when you've done something "perfectly", it means that you achieved a particular standard you set for yourself.

Types of Perfectionism

Meeting an Expectation

One might also define perfectionism as having matched an expectation that someone else has set.

Types of Perfectionism

Order and Organization

Order, organization, and having "everything in its place" is yet another way to think about perfectionism.

Types of Perfectionism

Ideals and 'Just Right' Experiences

Sometimes we "know" that something is ideal because it hits us "just right"; it looks, feels, and sounds right.

Types of Perfectionism

Absolutes: knowledge, certainty, safety

To have absolute, complete, comprehensive knowledge about something – to be convinced that this is the right direction to take -- is very satisfying and reassuring.

Types of Perfectionism

Being the best and the “best of the best”

Perfectionism Assessment

- ▶ Go to www.jeffszymanski.com to take a perfectionism assessment.
- ▶ Included are 17 different dimensions of perfectionism.
- ▶ Read each item and locate yourself on the healthy or unhealthy end of the continuum.

Perfectionism Assessment

- ▶ Example:
 - ▶ Unhealthy end of the continuum
 - ▶ There's frequently a large gap between my goals and my actual outcomes
 - ▶ Healthy end of the continuum
 - ▶ I typically achieve the goals I set for myself or come close enough for my own satisfaction

Perfectionism Profile

Based on how you answered questions on the assessment you will now have your own personalized perfectionism profile.

This will give you a clearer sense of when your perfectionism is working for you and where it is backfiring.

Healthy Perfectionists, Unhealthy Perfectionists, and Non Perfectionists

- ▶ You're operating within the realm of healthy perfectionism when your payoffs are greater than your costs; you are striving for and meeting standards you set for yourself; and you value organization.
- ▶ Your unhealthy perfectionism is in play when your behavior, choices and strategies are driven by factors such as a fear of failure; chronic concerns about making mistakes; a constant doubting of yourself; attempts to live up to others' expectations of you; anxiety about always falling short of self-made goals; and if your costs outweigh your payoffs.
- ▶ Non-perfectionists are the individuals who seem to not care much about their outcomes. They don't have particularly high standards, and in many cases they are fine with being average and just putting their time in.

Learning to Differentiate Between Intention, Strategy and Outcome

- ▶ **Intention:** I want to impress my boss and my new client.
- ▶ **Strategy:** I work long hours on the project trying to cover all of my bases and producing very detailed work.
- ▶ **Desired outcome:** The client tells me I've done a great job, my boss is happy with me, and I am satisfied with the final project.
- ▶ **Actual Outcome:** The client says that although the final product is good, he feels that I sometimes don't see the big picture. As a result, I feel bad about myself. My spouse is angry that I came home from the office at midnight every day for a week. Now we are fighting, and I feel unappreciated for having tried so hard and failing to receive glowing compliments.

Learning to Differentiate Between Intention, Strategy and Outcome

- ▶ **Intention:** I want to impress my boss and my new client.
- ▶ **Strategy:** I work long hours on the project, but ask for help from a trusted colleague who I think is talented. We decide to use some "tried and true" solutions, but also to throw in some novel but risky elements.
- ▶ **Desired outcome:** The client tells me I've done a great job, my boss is happy with me, and I am satisfied with the final project.
- ▶ **Actual Outcome:** The client really likes the final outcome. He says that he feels it is innovative, but also tells me that he'd like some of the riskier aspects toned down a little. The boss is happy with me and tells me that the client would like to work with me in the future, and he asks me to pass along congratulations as well to my partner on the project. Though my spouse is feeling a little ignored over the past week, I'm in such a good mood that we end up going out for a surprise dinner and have a great evening together.

Learning to Differentiate Between Intention, Strategy and Outcome

- ▶ Intention and desired outcome are the same in both examples.
- ▶ Difference in strategy employed and actual outcomes that resulted *from those strategies*.
- ▶ Bottom line: It isn't necessarily about changing your intention and desired outcomes (i.e., it isn't always necessary to "lower the bar"), it is about learning to vary up your strategies.

Persistence Versus Perseveration

- ▶ **Persistence** involves utilizing problem-solving and creativity.
- ▶ You **persist** in meeting a goal and if you hit an impenetrable roadblock, you figure out a way around it or try another strategy.
- ▶ **Persistence** is the ability to continue engaging in a behavior or activity to reach a goal, even when the task is difficult or takes a long time.
- ▶ **Persistence** involves sustained attention, a history of having your efforts pay off, and a sense of adaptability and flexibility.
- ▶ When you're **persistent**, you proceed step-by-step and remain focused on the big-picture goal.

Persistence Versus Perseveration

- ▶ Contrast persistence with **perseveration** or the tendency to continue using a particular strategy, even when it ceases to pay off.
- ▶ With **perseveration** you can get bogged down in the first few steps of a task.
- ▶ People who **perseverate** insist on completing each step perfectly before moving on to the next one; even if something isn't working, they continue to try to *make it* work.
- ▶ You tend to lose sight of your ultimate goal, get tunnel vision, and are only able to see what is right in front of you.
- ▶ **Perseveration** compels you to maintain the behavior whether or not it moves you toward your main goal.

The Five Seductions of Perfectionism

1. **More is always better**
2. **Mistakes are Catastrophic and to be avoided at all costs**
3. **Everything is equally important**
4. **"If you want something done right, do it yourself"**
5. **"Just one more minute..."**

**“More is Always Better”:
The Seduction**

- ▶ In some cases, more is better. Setting high standards for yourself can result in better outcomes.
- ▶ If we want to excel, do we want to risk showing someone less than our absolute best?

Why “More is always Better” Backfires

- ▶ We tend to run out of time, energy and resources if we throw everything we have at every task. As important as some outcomes are, it is critical to recognize that you do have limited time, energy and resources.
- ▶ Arbitrarily raising the bar every time will by definition result in failing at some point.
- ▶ Pure repetition of a task does not improve your performance over time.
- ▶ Task input and task outcomes appear to have a curvilinear relationship where the principle of “more is better” is replaced by “diminishing returns”.

Alternatives to “More is always Better”

1. Track the arc of your payoffs versus efforts
2. Consider Pareto’s Principle or the 80/20 rule
3. The value of psychological flexibility
4. Use the principles of “Deliberate Practice”

Mistakes are Catastrophic and to be Avoided at all Costs: The Seduction

- ▶ Mistakes can seem catastrophic and trigger feelings of intense guilt and anxiety
- ▶ Completing a project “error free” leads to a strong sense of satisfaction
- ▶ You sometimes think less of others when they make mistakes; won’t others evaluate you similarly?

Why Preoccupation with Mistakes Backfires

- ▶ The Pratfall Effect
- ▶ Excessive concerns about making mistakes can undermine performance and lead to playing it safe, rigid rule-following, and decreased creativity
- ▶ Harsh self-criticism in response to mistakes doesn't fix the problem
- ▶ Wabi-Sabi

Alternatives to Preoccupation with Mistakes

1. Develop a "scientific attitude" by strategically testing your theories and strategies to see which actually have the best payoffs and outcomes
2. Pay attention to context and when it makes sense to try experimenting
3. Remember that mistakes and weaknesses actually hold the key to potential improvements

Everything is Equally Important: The Seduction

- ▶ Who doesn't want to be thought of as intelligent, athletic, musically talented, etc.?
- ▶ It's appealing to imagine that others could see us as someone who is "good at everything."
- ▶ While it occurs to you to cut back and perhaps lower the bar on some of these areas, you then wonder-- who wants to be a slacker? Appear awkward? Or even worse -- be average?

When Treating Everything is Equally Important Backfires

- ▶ Attempting to do everything well -- and apply the same level of detail, effort, and energy to absolutely every task -- causes you to become exhausted all of the time. It also makes you feel like you never get to what is most meaningful to you.
- ▶ It takes 40 hours x 50 weeks = 2,000 hours x 5 years = 10,000 hours to become expert at a task or skill. You don't have 10,000 hours to devote to everything you want to excel at!

Alternatives to Treating Everything as Equally Important

1. Use your personal values to determine your priorities:
2. Learn to be strategic about when to give 100%, rather than waste effort on less important tasks
3. Use the "ABC" task-ranking strategy
4. Realize that no matter what, leading a courageous, effective, vital life always involves some level of sacrifice

ABC Task Ranking Exercise

- ▶ A Tasks – Three tasks to devote 100% effort
- ▶ B Tasks – Three tasks that are still above average, but working at 80%
- ▶ C Tasks – Three tasks where you just get by and allow yourself to be average
- ▶ F Tasks – Three tasks to let go of

"If You Want Something Done Right, Do It Yourself": The Seduction

- ▶ A need to be seen as independent and autonomous, and someone who completes projects effortlessly. Isn't that what everyone who strives for excellence looks like?
- ▶ Making sure that people always see your potential and what you can accomplish.
- ▶ The notion that on average, other people are lazy, waste time, and have lower standards than you.

When "If You Want Something Done Right, Do It Yourself" Backfires

- ▶ Be careful of "protecting your potential" by only showing end products and not rough drafts. This can lead to task avoidance and missed deadlines.
- ▶ A fresh set of eyes can spot oversights you might not have seen, resulting in better products and time saved.
- ▶ Perfectionistic self-presentation backfires, as it makes you more stressed out and less likeable.
- ▶ Being more competent sometimes translates into more work -- not necessarily more recognition.

**Alternatives to “If You Want
Something Done Right, Do It Yourself”**

1. Invite criticism, then distinguish the helpful suggestions from the unhelpful.
2. Napoleon’s Rule
3. Remember that you need to get feedback on your weaknesses to improve your skill set.
4. Recognize that delegating helps others develop skills and decreases your chances of burning out.
5. Develop a “cabinet”

“Just one more minute...”:

The Seduction

- ▶ You work long hours and skip vacations telling yourself, “It will take just one more minute, one more hour, one more week...”
- ▶ Or, “I’ll feel better with it out of the way. I can catch up on sleep over the weekend.”
- ▶ “All of this hard will pay off for me. I’ll eventually travel and spend more time with the family.”

**When “Just one more minute...”
Backfires**

- ▶ Burnout
- ▶ Reduced creativity

**Alternatives to “Just one more
minute...”**

1. Research on creative problem solving highlights the importance of an incubation period, and in many cases, taking a break improves performance and creativity.
2. Make sure that you schedule breaks and vary your daily activities across all valued domains in order to improve both your cognitive functioning and mood.

Summary

1. Separate healthy from unhealthy perfectionism remembering that non perfectionism (lazy) doesn't have to be your only alternative
2. Develop your own perfectionism profile to determine your strengths and weaknesses
3. Differentiate intention, strategy and outcome
4. Differentiate persistence from perseverance
5. Develop an action plan to counter the "seductions" of perfectionism

For More Information...

www.jeffszymanski.com

