



# THE DANGERS OF PERFECTIONISM

Being perfect sounds good, but the pressure can affect you physical and mental health. Organisational psychologist **RACHEL SETTI** offers some solutions.

**W**hat is it that drives so many of the highly successful yet anxious executives I've had the pleasure of coaching? In my experience, that double-edged sword called perfectionism has a lot to answer for.

To illustrate the potentially insidious impact of perfectionism, I will share the plight of a talented and dynamic leader I worked with recently. Let's call him Gavin. Gavin had an enviable menu of successes, was seen as a great asset to his business, and was appreciated by his peers and managers.

There was one issue, though: he was prone to anger. This anger would sometimes overtly seep into his behaviour, though more often than not Gavin would keep it inside (or "internalise" the feeling) and this was having a direct and negative impact on his work. By the time I saw Gavin, he had realised that his responses were inhibiting his capacity to progress and reach the career heights he knew he was capable of.

## Self-talk matters

Gavin and I worked together for some time to unearth his issues. Here was a smart, successful, switched-on individual who literally felt emotionally eaten up inside. On the face of it, it didn't make sense. However, after a process of self-searching, Gavin discovered the damaging effects of his constant and consistent

internal narrative that repeated in his mind, over and over again, like a broken record. This internal chatter (known as "self-talk") constantly berated Gavin for even the smallest misfortune of human error, such that any perceived negative feedback (i.e. a trigger event) would often feel excruciating.

He tried to hide his response as best he could, though the more he tried, the more he would ruminate, and the angrier he would become. And guess what? The anger clouded his thinking and judgment, and eventually undermined his capacity to meet his real potential. In short, Gavin's fear of failure was limiting his success.

In my experience, Gavin's thinking style is not uncommon among driven professionals. Undoubtedly, setting oneself challenging goals is often a key ingredient for success. However, tip that balance such that your measure of success is based on objectively unattainable standards and the path of (self) destruction lies ahead. Heard of the saying "nobody's perfect?" Well, it's true.

Research by American management psychologists Dr Nancy Leonard and Professor Michael Harvey found that some aspects or types of perfectionism can propel an individual towards positive outcomes. For example, when a person derives a sense of internal satisfaction for completing a job well and doesn't berate themselves for the occasional slip-up.

However, when an individual uses their success (or lack of) as a measure of self-worth, then they fall into the category referred to as negative perfectionism.

Perfectionistic tendencies usually begin in childhood through messages given to an individual via their role models. Such thoughts become habitual and unrelenting, meaning they revolve around the mind, and while they might be avoided for a while, unfortunately they don't easily disappear. The problem is that they are often not particularly rational or true, despite the fact their owners treat them with utmost esteem and authority. The real concern is that over an extended period of time, such perfectionism can lead to negative emotional states, including depression, anxiety, stress and a host of psychosomatic symptoms that affect performance – exactly as Gavin was experiencing.

But what of external influences on perfectionistic tendencies? As we know, humans are not islands, and it is widely believed that organisational culture can influence an individual's emotional state and behaviour significantly.

Some environments may well exacerbate existing maladjusted feelings and behaviour, particularly those that constantly scrutinise employee output. One example that springs to mind is the conventional billing system, which is de rigueur in many law firms today. Lawyers have often remarked to me that the established system cultivates a culture of internal competitiveness and errorless outputs. The conveyor belt of goal-oriented achievements (commonly measured in six minute increments) can be unrelenting, particularly as it is constantly monitored and judged.

Based on this feedback, it would seem that lawyers are groomed to live up to a set of pre-established expectations with metrics to match their every (billing and

perhaps non-billing) move. They also have limited control over this relatively black-and-white measurement system.

Overlay this with an individual who displays perfectionist tendencies and you can end up with a situation whereby their maladaptive thoughts are constantly reinforced. The long-term manifestations of this, you can imagine, are a set of unhealthy behaviours such as "procrastination, increased conflict, chemical use and abuse, eating disorders, coronary heart disease, chronic pain and even suicide" (Leonard and Harvey).

## The good news

There is good news, though. Change is on the horizon as some of the more traditional legal firm structures are being challenged in terms of their benefit to both practitioner and client.

One successful example is that of Keypoint Law, which, based on the pioneering work of its UK sister firm, is reframing the way lawyers structure their work. Lawyers are able to make choices as to the volume and type of work they get involved in, as well how much they charge for their services, thus gaining far more control over their professional destiny. It will be interesting to watch how this evolves and to observe how the legal profession, which seems over-represented by perfectionists, may evolve alongside the shift in traditional practices.

## PERFECTIONISM: HOW TO BEAT IT

Want to ensure this gremlin called perfectionism doesn't interrupt your true potential?

Listen to your self-talk for one week. What messages do you give yourself when you make mistakes? You'll be amazed how revealing a bit of self-observation is.

Write your thoughts down as you go (don't leave it until later, as memory has a tricky way of distorting reality).

At the end of the week, look at your list. What is your dominant pattern of thinking? What words are you using? Look out for thoughts starting with "I must" or "I have to" and reframe them into a set of more flexible options, such as "I will try to", "I prefer to" and "I choose to".

If it's too difficult to get rid of all the "musts", set yourself a couple of high priorities for the week, which truly need to be achieved seamlessly – though remember that, by definition, not everything can be high priority.

Above all, ask yourself whether you would treat a good friend the way you treat yourself. If the answer is no, then stop self-sabotaging and start self-forgiving.

**Rachel Setti** is an organisational psychologist and coach who specialises in effective leadership and interpersonal skills.



rachelsetti.com

**Setting oneself challenging goals is often a key ingredient for success. However, tip that balance so that your measure of success is based on objectively unattainable standards and the path of (self) destruction lies ahead. Heard of the saying "nobody's perfect"? Well, it's true.**