



## QUALITY VS. PERFECTIONISM: WHEN DOES OUR PUSH FOR EXCELLENCE BECOME DYSFUNCTIONAL?

BY ANN MCGEE-COOPER

“Compulsive perfectionism polishes the past when bold new skills are needed to unlock the future.”

—Dag Hammarskjöld

**E**ver since Dr. Deming taught us about the potential power in focusing on quality, the pressure and expectation for each person to constantly improve has steadily increased. We have learned that by shifting quality inspection from a special department to the person performing the particular task, profits, customer satisfaction, and even job satisfaction can soar. We have found that we can make incredible gains by setting bold goals, such as zero product defects or zero on-the-job accidents. The majority of companies now have some form of quality program, with continuous performance improvement the norm.

But at the same time that the pressure for “perfect” performance has grown, symptoms of burnout in the workplace have increased, such as procrastination and finger-pointing. Is there a point at which the push for excellence can go too far and actually become counterproductive? If so, how do we strive for quality, which is achievable over the long term, rather than for perfection, which is not?

### The Roots of Perfectionism

Many of us can trace the roots of the pressure to “be perfect” back to our early years. We were rewarded for being “right” in class and for exceptional performance in extracurricular activities. Earning others’ attention and admiration became a powerful payoff for error-free performance.

In the workplace, the push to improve can challenge and inspire us, transforming us from “hired hands” into “hired minds.” But when the drive for excellence becomes fused with our

ego or sense of self-worth, it can become damaging and even addictive. If I only feel good about myself when I am perfect, then I will have to work harder and harder to keep from making the inevitable mistake. And I may find myself devoting disproportionate amounts of effort to less important tasks—which I can perfect—leaving little time for tackling the big challenges.

### Matching Effort to Importance

Thus, one aspect of achieving quality is to determine what merits that extra push and what doesn’t. When I labor over the spelling, grammar, and punctuation on my internal e-mails at the expense of completing a complex proposal, I’ve lost my sense of priorities. In an e-mail message to my colleagues, what is really important is the quality of the ideas that I convey, not the polished form in which they appear. Because we all have far more on our plates than we can reasonably accomplish, it is critical that we match our effort on a task to its overall importance.

Here are some other suggestions for overcoming perfectionism—and achieving quality—in our work lives:

- **Look at your to-do list for the day, and evaluate tasks by importance.**

Although everything may seem like a top priority, when time starts running out, you’re going to give the last tasks on your list less attention than the first ones. Why not be proactive and move some less critical items to the bottom of the queue? You can then schedule more time for those key projects that will have a real impact for you, your client, or your organization. This may be difficult at first, because many of us like to tackle things that we know how to do well before turning to tasks

that we’re not as comfortable with. If prioritizing in the way described here is challenging for you, find a trusted work partner to give you feedback on what you are “obsessing” over versus what really needs your attention.

- **“Find one thing each day to do imperfectly.”** I found this quote many years ago, and it has set me free. As creatures of habit, we often labor over chores that don’t make a difference in the end. For example, I use to obsess over my appearance, devoting an hour or so to my hair and nails. I eventually found that what my clients really wanted was a well-rested and mentally prepared presenter instead of a perfect runway model.

- **Enjoy frequent breaks.** One sure sign of perfectionism is deluding ourselves into thinking that we don’t have time for breaks, joy, or laughter. Getting away from work gives you a new, balanced perspective on tasks. When you are fatigued, finding the right word to use in a proposal can seem like a “life-or-death” decision. When you are rested, words not only come easier, their relative importance changes. By renewing yourself, you will enhance your creativity, intuition, and problem-solving ability.

One last note: Until we devote the same effort to creating quality in our personal lives that we invest in creating “perfect” products and services, we’ll always end up hopelessly out of balance. So, be sure to put some extracurricular activities at the top of your to-do list! ■

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