



# CHARTING THE CHALLENGE OF PERFECTIONISM

BY PHIL AND DEB RAMSEY

“Give up the nonsensical and punishing quest for perfection that dogs too many of us through too much of our lives. It is a quest that causes us to doubt and denigrate ourselves, our true selves, our quirks and foibles and great leaps into the unknown . . .”  
—Anna Quindlen

Most people appreciate when a task is done well. And we know what can result when we strive to do something to the best of our ability. People who consistently strive for excellence make a tremendous contribution to your organization, challenging themselves and others to learn, grow, and find better ways of meeting the real needs of stakeholders.

For some people, however, striving for outstanding performance is not a healthy pursuit of excellence. On the surface, their behavior may look healthy, but their efforts are driven by fear of failure and worthlessness. Rigid thinking, self-deception, and image maintenance all contribute to what is, essentially, a learning disability. “Perfectionism” is the term used to describe this pattern of self-defeating attitudes.

The nature of perfectionism, along with the learning challenges it presents, can be charted using a causal loop diagram (see “Striving for Consistency”). This diagram can give us clues about what drives perfectionism and offers ideas for ways to break the cycle of negativity that it can lead to.

## Achieving Cognitive Consistency

People strive to establish consistency in their lives. Each of us seeks to align our behavior (what we see ourselves doing) and our self-concept (how we assess ourselves) with the deeply held beliefs that make up our worldview. Perfectionism involves a distorted worldview that over time makes it

harder and harder to achieve this alignment or consistency.

By worldview, we mean a set of beliefs that are typically held at a tacit, or unspoken, level. While people might find it difficult to put into words the underlying assumptions and beliefs that make up their worldview, these beliefs shape the way they react to situations that arise in their lives. Perfectionists generally hold a similar set of attitudes that, were they expressed, might include the following:

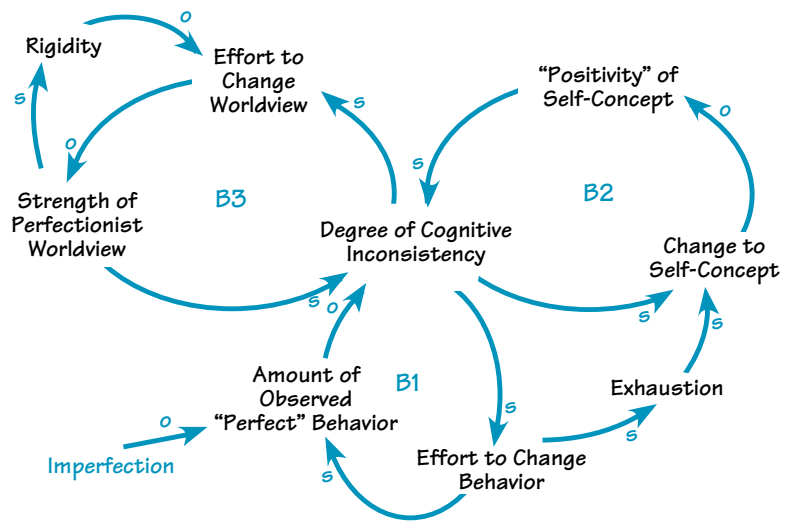
- It is important to be a worthwhile person.
- To be worthwhile, a person must do everything perfectly.
- Worthwhile people never lower their standards.

Imagine you are six years old, intelligent and hardworking, and you have just scored 100 percent on a

mathematics test at school. You can hold on to these three perfectionist beliefs without experiencing any great inconsistency. You can see yourself as worthwhile and observe that your performance is perfect. What happens, though, if you “only” score 90 percent on your next test?

This score, while acceptable for most people, is inconsistent with the perfectionist’s worldview and self-concept. As the CLD shows, the cognitive inconsistency could be brought back into balance in one of three ways: by changing one’s behavior to again achieve perfection (Loop B1), by changing one’s self-concept to “I am not worthwhile” (Loop B2), or by changing one’s worldview (Loop B3). If you were a six-year-old, you would not give much thought to your worldview; most likely, you would decide to work harder at being per-

## STRIVING FOR CONSISTENCY



When a perfectionist falls short of her impossibly high expectations, the results are inconsistent with her worldview and self-concept, leading to self-destructive behavior and poor self-image. She can regain a sense of consistency by changing her behavior to again achieve perfection (B1), changing her self-concept (B2), or changing her worldview (B3)

fect, thereby activating Loop B1. And because many six-year-olds have the potential to achieve perfect performance on tests, the effort most likely will be rewarded.

As a child gets older, "perfect" performance becomes more difficult—and eventually unattainable—as tests get harder and competition becomes tougher. Efforts to change or improve behavior do not always deliver the desired outcome; they just leave the perfectionist exhausted.

With growing exhaustion, perfectionists seek alignment of their beliefs in a different way: by reassessing their self-worth, coming to the conclusion that "I am not worthwhile." So instead of cycling around Loop B1, the perfectionist flips over to Loop B2 and adopts a negative self-concept.

Time spent in Loop B2 is time off from the rigors of B1, so after a while the exhaustion will subside. However, even with the new negative self-concept, the perfectionist still feels a sense of inconsistency, since part of the perfectionist worldview is that it is important to be worthwhile. A new pattern emerges: striving for perfect performance (B1) until reaching a state of exhaustion, flipping into B2 and a more negative self-concept, then as one's energy allows, returning to the grind of B1.

Others often give perfectionists advice like "Don't be so hard on yourself," "Lighten up," and "Be happy with 90 percent." Such input would be fine for someone who was not a perfectionist. Perfectionists, though, hear this advice as "Lower your standards," which directly conflicts with their worldview. If they could lower their standards, they wouldn't be perfectionists! So they continue to fall into a pattern of negative self-concept and efforts to change their behavior.

Some perfectionists find low-energy ways to change their behavior so that it looks perfect—for example, by procrastinating on completing their assignments so they don't have to deal with performance stress—but these quick-fixes cannot last. Because of their worldview, perfectionists

become rigid and unwilling to address deeply held beliefs, even when they are clearly destructive.

### Leverage

Perfectionism is often associated with self-destructive behavior and poor self-image, conditions that can become serious if not addressed. Unless perfectionists get help in changing their worldview, the solutions they try to put into place will

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only be symptomatic. Leverage lies in finding a way past the rigidity that prevents people from exploring and changing their deeply held beliefs.

One way to do so is by proposing changes to the perfectionist worldview in terms that do not attack an individual's underlying beliefs. As mentioned above, encouraging perfectionists to lower their standards is self-defeating. But perfectionists are usually eager to raise their standards; that is, to believe that they are not doing enough.

In his book *The Inner Game of Work: Focus, Learning, Pleasure, and Mobility in the Workplace* (Random House, 2001), Tim Gallwey suggests that in order to make work sustainable, people need to pay attention to Performance, Learning, and Experience. Perfectionists focus their attention almost entirely in the area of performance. They sacrifice opportunities to learn and the quality of their experience in a vain attempt to attain perfect levels of performance. By focusing on the need to give attention to learning and experience in addition to performance, perfectionists may be able to frame the change

as a raising rather than a lowering of standards.

You might try this three-pronged approach when coaching perfectionists in the workplace. Encourage them to assess their work in terms of performance, learning, and experience. Make the point that achieving at a high level requires experimentation and failure. In this context, failure is something to be celebrated; it is proof that effort is going into the learning aspect of work.

Some people may find a simple tool useful. Encourage them to draw three lines on a piece of paper, each with 0 at one end and 100 at the other. Have them label them "Learning," "Experience," and "Performance." After the completion of a significant task, have them determine a score for each of these elements. By doing so, the individual will come to understand achievement from a broader perspective than merely focusing on what performance can offer.

Perfectionism, with its emphasis on hard work and excellence, can appear to be highly desirable. Don't be fooled. The dynamics revealed in "Striving for Consistency" take a heavy toll on the people involved, their colleagues, friends, and families. And this behavior cannot be sustained indefinitely; it ultimately leads to burnout in one form or another. Look for ways to help perfectionists understand these dynamics and address the worldview behind them. ■

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