

The Paradox of Perfectionism

This summer, I walked in a beautiful labyrinth in the Berkshire Mountains. Surrounded by hills, a lake, and vibrant sunflowers, I journeyed to the center and back ... concentrating on mind, body, and soul. As I walked toward the middle, I focused on what I'd like to let go of; on the way out, I dwelled on what I want.

This experience was part of a wonderful workshop I attended called "Bootcamp for Goddesses™." This modern goddess asked to let go of perfectionism. I admit to you that I'm a "straight A student" still trying to make perfect grades in life. Unfortunately, the results are hard on the body and spirit.

As successful dentists, "perfectionism-itis" may afflict you as well. Professor Stephen Palmer of the Center for Stress Management in London, England, said, "Most of the clients I see for occupational stress and burnout are perfectionists."

In my quest to overcome perfectionism, I have found these methods that may bring more joy and satisfaction to your workplace as well:

❶ **Make the distinction between what is achievable and what isn't.**

Do you set goals that are impossible? Do you give your team an incentive based on revenue, but the numbers are wishful thinking? Goals are great, and I'd like for you to review them thoughtfully. Retain those that can be reached. According to an article in *Psychology Today*, one major company nearly engineered its own demise by setting sales goals so high that it failed to meet them for 16 consecutive years.

❷ **Work within your limitations.**

There's nothing wrong with trying to do your best. The trick is knowing when enough is enough. Chris Dunkerley wrote in an article, "The Paradox of Perfectionism," that the flexible thinker aims for the best and can accept it when the outcome is not perfect. However, the perfectionist strives for 110 percent and feels like a failure when every duck does not line up in pristine formation. Try to flow like the ducks.

❸ **Listen to your self-talk.**

Are you saying positive or negative things to yourself? Are you even aware of your inner messages? Here are just a few examples of frequently used, negative self-talk:

- "I get sick just thinking about it."
- "No matter what I eat, I still gain weight."
- "With my luck, I don't have a chance."
- "X makes more money than me."
- "That patient will drive me nuts."

The cure is "situational self-talk" suggested by Shad Helmstetter, author of "What To Say When You Talk to Yourself." He says, "It can

be accomplished in a moment, out loud, or silently to yourself. It can be a single thought, or a few chosen words." You must become aware of the negativity and make an instant adjustment. Stare at your inner critic and choose present tense verbiage to reverse the emotion.

❹ **Challenge your thinking.**

I loved watching the Olympics, and yet I found it difficult. We'd see a beautiful gymnastics routine followed by a three-second clip of the gymnast slightly bobbling on the beam. Perfectionism is a prerequisite for these games. A nanosecond or "nanoinch" discerns the winner from the loser. But life can't work like that. Think of the times you've been less than perfect and you survived! Replace your Olympic perfectionist thoughts with: "It's strongly preferable to do a great job, but

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realistically, life will go on anyway.”

⑤ Lighten up on your team and family.

Perfectionists often expect everyone around them to be perfect, and they become impatient or angry when others are not. How often do you rearrange the dishes in the dishwasher?

I am not asking you to compromise on your expectations of your team. However, to combat the emotions of anger and disappointment when others can't meet your level of perfection requires you to make a conscious decision, not to force your perfectionist ways on others. Try it and see what happens.

⑥ Find the humor in the situation.

Sometimes the only thing we can change in a situation is our attitude. One time I stood up to give a speech, and my skirt did not. Everyone began laughing and pointing at my feet. Slowly and painfully I looked down and saw my plaid, pleated, red and gray skirt hovering over my pumps.

Can anyone relate to a tight waistband? The button and buttonhole struggled to reach each other that morning. This union was tenuous at best, until I sneezed during the introduction of my presentation. That button was history.

You give three speeches every time you open your mouth: the one you prepared, the one you give, and the perfect one going home in the car. The perfect comment at this miserable moment, said to my steering wheel much later, was, “You certainly got more than you paid for!”

Before you say, “But I am NOT funny,” think about all of the “tragedies” that have befallen you, those that you now tell others while laughing. In my workshops, I ask people to tell their humorous stories. A hygienist once tilted the dental chair so far back that the patient lost his toupee. It landed on the dentist's arm. He jerked his arm forward and the toupee hopped right back into its proper place. That patient and team are still laughing many years later.

The paradox of perfectionism is that perfectionists may underperform due to the added stress and pressure. Follow these six principles to become a more flexible thinker and doer.

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