



Are you striving for perfection or excellence?

Description

Pitfalls and solutions associated with maladaptive perfectionism

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What is perfectionism?

The term “perfectionist” is attributed to people who pursue flawless work and set unrealistically high standards and goals for themselves. Perfectionists tend to be very critical of the work that they do – even when it’s done well, they always manage to find a fault.

Of course, a small amount of perfectionism, or “adaptive perfectionism”, is a good thing. Adaptive perfectionists have high standards, work with optimism and pleasure, and consistently desire to improve their knowledge and skills. Importantly, they know when to stop work and “ship” the finished product.

Maladaptive Perfectionism

The negative form of this condition is called “maladaptive perfectionism”. Maladaptive perfectionists often have a fear of failure. They’re never completely satisfied with the work that they do, they’re often unhappy or anxious, and they’re obsessed with producing perfect work, even when it takes too long to deliver.

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It’s often easy to identify team members who are maladaptive perfectionists. If a team member’s obsession with being “perfect” starts to affect their or their team’s performance negatively, then it’s likely that their perfectionism is maladaptive.

The problems with maladaptive perfectionism



One of the most damaging effects of maladaptive perfectionism is its impact on health and wellbeing. Numerous studies have linked it to procrastination, depression, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, general anxiety, severe stress, low self-esteem, and even suicide.

Maladaptive perfectionism can also negatively affect the morale and effectiveness of a team. Maladaptive perfectionists often find it difficult to meet deadlines, delegate work, and accept constructive criticism. They'll often micromanage teammates when they do succeed in delegating a task, and they can be less productive than others, simply because they spend so much time checking and rechecking their work.

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While all these effects are bad, it's important to realize that maladaptive perfectionists mean well. They're committed to their work, as well as to the organization's success. If they didn't care about what they were doing, or whom they were doing it for, they wouldn't waste their time on it!

Also, keep in mind that, sometimes, a job or task needs to be perfect: for instance, when you're sending work out to clients, rolling out a new product, or doing jobs where people's health and safety – or large amounts of money – are at stake. Perfectionists can be assets in these situations, so it's important to find a good balance.

Help them develop self-awareness

Maladaptive perfectionists often don't realize how their behaviour affects others. This includes underestimating the importance of the deadlines that they miss, as well as not realizing how much they're upsetting their colleagues. This is why it's important to help perfectionists develop their self-awareness.

Start by having an honest conversation with them, to find out if they're aware of their maladaptive perfectionist tendencies. Next, communicate how these behaviours are not only limiting their performance, but that of other people as well. Be specific about what you've noticed.

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Be sensitive when you address this issue. Remember, your perfectionist team members care a great deal about the quality of their work. Make sure that you express your gratitude for all that they've done. Point out times when their perfectionism was an asset (for instance, they might have spotted an important detail or a mistake that you missed.) But you also need to be clear about how their behaviour is hurting others and limiting their potential.

You can help maladaptive perfectionists develop self-awareness by putting them into new situations. Often, a new experience or challenge forces people to be more self-aware; they might also learn something new about themselves. Keeping a daily journal will also help perfectionist team members develop self-awareness.

When you notice that perfectionist team members are too focused on an unimportant detail or process, commend their focus and determination, but stress that it's time to move on. If they're stuck on doing something in a specific way, encourage them to come up with an alternative solution. Remind them of the most important goals of the task or project.

Help them understand the cost implications

Maladaptive perfectionists often struggle to sign off on a project, regardless of whether they miss a deadline or run over budget. Missed deadlines can cause the team embarrassment, can result in a loss of reputation, and



can delay important projects or undermine their business case.

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Help them delegate

Start by explaining how successful delegation will help them work more productively, and help the team move forward as a whole. Suggest several tasks that they might be able to delegate, as well as the team member that you think is best suited for each task.

Even when your maladaptive perfectionists succeed in delegating a task, there's a good chance that they'll micromanage. Help them avoid micromanagement by communicating how important it is that they give other people the chance to learn and grow from the task.

Make sure that they're in the right role

Maladaptive perfectionists can be unsuccessful when they're put in charge of large projects, or when they're in a multi-skilled role. This is not because of a lack of skill or ability, but rather because their attention to detail works against them. Tasks that perfectionists can struggle with include those with a lot of different priorities, or tasks that depend on the work or involvement of several other team members.

You can help them in their current role by assigning deadlines to every task, and by being firm about what will happen if they miss the deadline. You can also team them up with less detail-oriented colleagues (as long as they have patience) This kind of partnership will force them to spend less time on unimportant details, and will encourage them to let go of work that isn't triple-checked.

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Provide feedback carefully

No matter how much positive feedback you start with, your maladaptive perfectionists are likely going to focus only on the negative. To manage this tendency, ask how you can best give them feedback and listen to what they have to say. They might be able to give you a useful insight into how they would like these sessions to be conducted.

Teach them to learn from mistakes

Maladaptive perfectionists often have a fear of failure. This means that they may not take on new challenges unless they're sure that they can complete them successfully.

Encourage your perfectionists to confront this fear. Let them know that mistakes – and even outright failures (as long as they are minor) – are an important part of learning and growth. If they never take a risk and learn from their mistakes, they'll never reach their full potential, either personally or professionally.

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