

Perfectionism Isn't Really About Being Perfect

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Perfectionism is a tricky thing in healthcare. After all, this is an industry in which details matter. High standards matter. And mistakes can impact actual lives. So, perfectionism can seem pretty innocent. Admirable, even.

But it's not.

Perfectionism isn't about getting it right. It's about avoiding getting it wrong.

We've been studying perfectionism in the workplace for years, and one of the things I've learned is that we've been looking at it in completely the wrong way. We tend to think a perfectionist is someone with really high standards, someone who pays attention to every detail or someone who wants to do excellent work.

That's not perfectionism. That's excellence.

Perfectionism is rooted in fear. It happens when we set unrealistic expectations for ourselves and connect our ability to meet those expectations to our self-worth. We aren't simply trying to do a good job; somewhere underneath it, we're trying to prove something about ourselves—that we're smart enough, competent enough, successful enough, good enough.

And when our worth is on the line, getting something wrong feels very different. A mistake isn't just a mistake. Critical feedback isn't just information. Someone disagreeing with our decision can feel like a judgment of our competence.

Excellence is about the work. Perfectionism is about your worth.

And that's why perfectionism can be so hard to recognize in ourselves. It doesn't always look like obsessing over every detail. It can look like overthinking a decision because you're afraid of making the wrong one, overpreparing because you want to eliminate the possibility of being caught off guard or procrastinating because starting something you aren't sure you can do well feels incredibly uncomfortable.

It can look like people-pleasing because disappointing someone feels unbearable. Reassurance-seeking because you don't quite trust your own answer. Replaying conversations and wondering what you should have said differently. Comparing yourself to everyone around you. Avoiding a difficult conversation because you don't know exactly how it will go. Or struggling to delegate because someone else might not do it the way you would.

None of those behaviors necessarily scream perfectionism. But they can all be ways we protect ourselves from the possibility of getting something wrong.

And our research suggests these patterns are incredibly common. My team and I have partnered with the University of Northern Colorado on three studies examining perfectionism in the workplace. In our most recent study of more than 1,700 professionals, 93% reported struggling with some form of perfectionism. Eighty-eight percent reported spending time during the workday overthinking decisions, and 83% reported procrastinating on tasks.

Perfectionism isn't simply an uncomfortable personal habit. There's a real cost to it. So, what do we do about it?

1. **Become an observer of your perfectionism.** You cannot change something you don't recognize. Instead of immediately trying to fix your perfectionism, start noticing it. When does it get louder? What situations trigger it? What does it look

like for you? Maybe you overthink. Maybe you overprepare. Maybe you people-please, procrastinate or seek reassurance. Maybe your perfectionism looks like control. Awareness gives you enough space to recognize, oh, this is my perfectionism talking.

2. **Get curious about what's underneath it.** Once you notice the pattern, resist the urge to judge yourself for it. Get curious instead. One of my favorite questions is: What am I afraid will happen if I get this wrong? Maybe you're afraid you'll disappoint someone, look incompetent, be criticized or make a decision you'll regret. The answer can help you distinguish between what the situation actually requires and what your perfectionism is asking you to do to protect your self-worth.
3. **Practice a different response.** Turning down the volume on perfectionism isn't something you simply think your way out of. You have to practice it. Make the decision when you have enough information instead of all the information. Let someone else approach the work differently than you would. Have the difficult conversation without rehearsing every possible response. Decide what actually needs to be excellent, because everything cannot be a 10. Some things absolutely need to be a 10, especially in healthcare. And some things can be a seven out of 10 and you move forward.

And if you lead people, there's another reason this work matters: Your perfectionism isn't just about you.

The way you respond to mistakes, uncertainty, disagreement and imperfect work teaches everyone around you what is safe. If you constantly step in, people eventually stop stepping up. If you second-guess every decision, people learn to second-guess theirs. If getting something wrong is treated like failure, people become much less willing to experiment, innovate or take ownership.

That's when perfectionism stops being an individual issue and starts becoming a workplace issue.

Healthcare needs excellence. It needs incredibly high standards. It needs leaders who care deeply about quality, outcomes and getting the things that matter most right.

But excellence and perfectionism are not the same thing.

Excellence is about the work. Perfectionism is about your worth.

And the better we become at recognizing the difference in ourselves, the less likely we are to unknowingly ask everyone around us to pay the price for our perfectionism.

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