Perfection Is the Enemy of Good!
Why You May Benefit From Pursuing Excellence Rather Than Perfection

By Gabe Hamda, Ph.D., SPHR

Executive Summary

“Perfection is the enemy of good” seems counterintuitive, but extensive research shows it is often the case. Whether you freeze when trying to accomplish important tasks because circumstances are not perfect, or feel anxiety and unworthiness due to perfectionist expectations, you may benefit from pursuing excellence rather than perfection.

Perfectionism can be defined as expecting oneself or others to produce a desired and high quality outcome during the first attempt; while excellence is iteratively working toward producing a valuable outcome. Some terms that are associated with the concept of perfection are: stressful, seeking to impress, inflexible, intolerant, doubting, judgmental, and control. Some words that are associated with excellence are: useful, improve, iterate, flexible, confidence, and dynamic.

Perfectionist behavior has been the subject of extensive research. Some of the consequences of perfectionist behavior include: performance anxiety, burnout, depression, eating disorders, and even suicide.

Coping strategies to turn from perfectionist behavior to the pursuit of excellence include:

- Increasing your awareness of the self-critical nature of all or nothing thoughts and how they extend to other people in your life.
- Being realistic about what you can do. By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that “imperfect” results do not lead to the punitive consequences you expect and fear.
- Setting strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on to another activity.
- Learning how to deal with criticism. Remember that criticism is a natural thing from which to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.
- Forgiving yourself in your moments of imperfections.
- Forgiving others’ imperfections.
- Developing humor.
- Learning from mistakes.

While perfectionism is likely to jeopardize the well-being of individual contributors, teams, and organizations, the pursuit of excellence is likely to benefit all involved.


**Selected Quotes**

- *If you wait for perfect conditions, you will not get anything done.* – Ecclesiastes 11: 4
- *Excellence is the gradual result of always striving to do better.* – Pat Riley
- *We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.* – Aristotle
- *Excellence is openness to being wrong. Perfection is having to be right.* – Thomas Greenspon
- *Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren’t used to an environment where excellence is expected.* – Steve Jobs
- *Excellence is a journey. Perfectionism is destination.* – Thomas Greenspon
- *As you all know, I’m kind of a perfectionist.* – Tiger Woods
- *Excellence is acceptance. Perfectionism is judgement.* – Thomas Greenspon
- *People often called us perfectionists, but we were not looking for perfection. We were looking for some kind of magic in the music.* – Paul Simon
- *Excellence is encouraging. Perfectionism is criticizing.* – Thomas Greenspon
- *If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate.* – Tal Ben-Shahar
- *Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way.* – Booker T. Washington

**Introduction**

Our daily life is filled with a mixture of activities. Some activities are really important and of high priority. Others are not as important. Clearly, it is wise to focus our time, energy, and attention on the most important activities.

A person with a perfectionist tendency approaches every activity with a perfectionist approach, which slows down getting anything accomplished to meet established deadlines. Moreover, working with and working for a perfectionist can be very stressful due to unreasonable expectations and demands for everything to be perfect.

The purpose of this article is to advocate for the pursuit of excellence as an alternative to a perfectionist approach. Simply defined, the pursuit of excellence is a step by step iterative approach to achieve extraordinary outcomes.

**Perfection Versus Excellence**

Perfection can be defined as expecting oneself or others to produce a desired and high quality outcome during the first attempt. Excellence is iteratively working toward producing a valuable outcome.
What is Perfectionism?

In his book, *Moving Past Perfect*, Thomas Greenspon defines perfectionism as follows: “Perfectionism is not about doing our best. It’s not about the struggle for excellence, or the healthy striving for high goals. Perfectionism is about believing that if we can just do something perfectly, other people will love and accept us – and if we can’t, we’ll never be good enough. Perfectionism is a burden that takes a heavy toll. Personal relationships are strained. Intimacy is elusive. Work seems overwhelming. Creativity slows to a trickle. Physical exhaustion is common. Perfectionism is painful and debilitating – a no-win situation.”

According to Monica Frank, a clinical and sport psychologist, perfectionism is an “individual's belief that he or she must be perfect to be acceptable. Perfectionism is black and white with no gray area. Anything other than perfect is failure. Perfectionism is an attitude, not necessarily a behavior. In other words, two people can engage in the same behavior such as trying to win an Olympic gold medal but one can be pursuing excellence and the other is demanding perfection. The difference lies in the thought process about the goal or behavior, not in the goal or behavior itself.”

What is the Pursuit of Excellence?

In 1982, Tom Peters published an incredibly influential business book, *In Search of Excellence*. Peters defined eight characteristics of excellent companies: a bias for action, staying close to the customer, autonomy and entrepreneurship, productivity through people, clear and compelling organizational values, focusing on what you do best, operating with a lean staff, and finding a balance between having enough structure without getting stuck in it.

In a 2012 article in *Forbes*, Holly Green takes a new look at the subject and suggests that today, “excellence is more than a set of principles. It’s a set of beliefs, ways of thinking, a matter of discipline, and ways of focusing.” Green states that excellence starts with getting clarity on the end state you wish to achieve and driving towards it every day. In addition, excellence requires knowing when to push on (even when you don’t have all the information or the perfect solution) and constantly refining as you forge ahead. Excellence also means accepting only the best, and understanding that when it is not given that you, as the leader, are at least partly responsible.

Pursuing excellence may require tremendous effort and focus as well as other resources. But, unlike perfectionism, it does not demand a sacrifice of self-esteem as it tends to focus on the process of achievement rather than the outcome.
A Side by Side Comparison of Perfection Versus Excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Perfection</th>
<th>Excellence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desired Outcome</td>
<td>Flawless</td>
<td>Useful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Strenuous Effort</td>
<td>Iterative Effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on People</td>
<td>Stressful</td>
<td>Fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>To Impress</td>
<td>To Improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Quote</td>
<td>Do It Right the First Time</td>
<td>Quality Is a Journey Not a Destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>Negative Effect</td>
<td>Positive Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Inflexible</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistakes</td>
<td>Not Tolerated</td>
<td>Welcomed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process/Results</td>
<td>Results-Oriented</td>
<td>Process-Oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>Doubt</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Judgmental</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means-Ends</td>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>Journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamism</td>
<td>Rigid</td>
<td>Dynamic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Does “Perfection is the Enemy of Good” Mean?

“Perfection is the enemy of good” seems counterintuitive, but extensive research shows it is often the case. One aspect of this is the act of freezing when trying to accomplish important tasks due to not having perfect circumstances. Ecclesiastes 11: 4 instructs, “If you wait for perfect conditions, you will not get anything done.” Other aspects include the anxiety and feelings of unworthiness that come from perfectionist expectations as well as more extreme results including burnout, negative health consequences, and even suicide.

What Does “Perfection is the Enemy of Good” Not Mean?

This author understands that some readers of this article may not be fans of this adage. Their position may be due to experiencing or perceiving the adage as giving justification for mediocrity, incompetence, lack of planning, or lack of discipline. These feelings and perceptions are understandable.

This author chose to use this adage to advocate the pursuit of excellence to achieve more and to engage people who are not wired to be perfectionists. Thus, the phrase “perfection is the enemy of good” is intended to show the value of excellence, competence, planning, and a disciplined approach through the pursuit of excellence as opposed to perfection for perfection’s sake.
Research Relevant to Perfectionism Versus Excellence

A Comparative Study between Professional Ballet Dancers and Olympic Standard Triathletes

Jennifer M. Bolt conducted this qualitative research to examine the line that exists between a positive, healthy striving for excellence versus a debilitating, destructive pursuit of perfection within the fields of dance and sport. To do so, Bolt conducted several interviews with both professional ballet dancers and Olympic standard triathletes. Bolt felt that illuminating this distinction could help in preventing serious disorders such as performance anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and even suicide.

Participants in this research were confined to seasoned professionals who supported themselves by performing in their respective line of work. Presumably these individuals had arrived at some way of coping, either positively or negatively, with the inherent stresses of their work, and Bolt sought to examine these coping mechanisms.

The participants in both subcultures revealed reoccurring patterns concerning their views on the difference between a healthy pursuit of excellence and a debilitating quest for perfection. Many participants indicated that they had struggled with perfectionistic behavior at some point in their lives. Some admitted to having experienced full-blown perfectionism that had even manifested itself in the form of anorexia or depression. The majority who indicated this, indicated that these maladaptive behaviors were most prominent in early adolescence, which often coincided with the time they decided to train professionally. Finally, all the participants consistently indicated a correlation between the inherent stresses of their profession and the potential to develop debilitating perfectionistic behavior. Many felt, however, that having a ‘perfectionist streak’ was in part, a necessary component to achieve high levels within their domain.

Bolt concluded that making a clear distinction early on in one’s pre-professional training between what is excellence and what is perfection, can help eliminate the chances for developing negative, ineffective work habits and destructive thought patterns that can later manifest in serious psychological problems.

Multi-dimensional Perfectionism and Burnout

According to research published by the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, concerns about perfectionism can sabotage success at work and school, leading to stress, burnout and potential health problems. In this 2015 meta-analysis of the relationship between perfectionism and burnout, Andrew Hill and Thomas Curran analyzed the findings from 43 previous studies conducted over 20 years.

This meta-analysis did find that perfectionism is not all bad. The positive aspect of perfectionism, called “perfectionistic strivings,” involves the setting of high personal standards and working toward those goals in a pro-active manner. These efforts may help maintain a sense of accomplishment and delay the debilitating effects of burnout, the study found.

The dark side of perfectionism, called “perfectionistic concerns,” can be more detrimental when people constantly worry about making mistakes, letting others down, or not measuring up to their own impossibly high standards, said lead researcher Andrew Hill, an associate professor of sport psychology at York St. John University in England. Previous research has shown that
perfectionistic concerns and the stress they generate can contribute to serious health problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, fatigue, and even early mortality.

“Perfectionistic concerns capture fears and doubts about personal performance, which creates stress that can lead to burnout when people become cynical and stop caring,” Hill said. “It also can interfere with relationships and make it difficult to cope with setbacks because every mistake is viewed as a disaster.”

The study found that perfectionistic concerns had the strongest negative effects in contributing to burnout in the workplace, possibly because people have more social support and clearly defined objectives in education and sports. A student can be rewarded for hard work with a high grade, or a tennis player can win the big match, but a stellar performance in the workplace may not be recognized or rewarded, which may contribute to cynicism and burnout.

“People need to learn to challenge the irrational beliefs that underlie perfectionistic concerns by setting realistic goals, accepting failure as a learning opportunity, and forgiving themselves when they fail,” Hill said. “Creating environments where creativity, effort and perseverance are valued also would help.”

Dr. Thomas Curran, Lecturer in Sport Psychology at the University of Bath and co-author of the Study, added: “As a society we tend to hold perfectionism as a sign of virtue or high achievement. Yet our findings show that perfectionism is a largely destructive trait. We suggest its effects can be managed and organizations must be clear that perfection is not a criteria of success. Instead, diligence, flexibility and perseverance are far better qualities.”

Most people display some characteristics of perfectionism in some aspect of their lives, but perfectionistic strivings or concerns may be more dominant. The development of a personality profile that identifies perfectionistic concerns might be a valuable tool in detecting and helping individuals who are prone to burnout.

Perfectionism and Suicide
In a 2014 article in *Review of General Psychology*, Gordon Flett and others reviewed and summarized contemporary research on the role of perfectionism in suicide. In one 2007 study, researchers conducted interviews with friends and family members of people who had recently killed themselves. Without prompting, more than half of the deceased were described as “perfectionists” by their loved ones. Similarly, in a British study of students who committed suicide, 11 out of the 20 students who had died were described by those who knew them as being afraid of failure. In another study, more than 70% of 33 boys and young men who had killed themselves were said by their parents to have placed “exceedingly high” demands and expectations on themselves – traits associated with perfectionism.

Perfectionism and Longevity
A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Health Psychology* linked the trait of perfectionism to increased likelihood of premature death. This study followed 450 elderly Canadians for 6 ½ years, and found that perfectionists were 51% more likely to have died during the life of the study than those with more reasonable expectations. Researchers continue to investigate the link between perfectionism and negative health consequences, but presumably a large factor is the massively increased stress
perfectionism inflicts. Thus, overcoming perfectionism may help not only your mental health, but also your very physical survival. One of the tyrannies of perfectionism is the way that it narrows focus to all-or-nothing levels; this has consequences.

**Learning Organizations Learn from Mistakes**

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1996) think of an organization as a whole as learning. In their perspective, an organization is learning when its members are in organizational roles acting on behalf of the organization. In order for learning to continue over time, an organization must create a culture where mistakes are considered opportunities for feedback and growth and its members are not penalized for reflecting critically upon their individual contributions to organizational problems (Argyris, 1991).

**Perfectionism Versus Healthy Striving**

According to the Counseling and Mental Health Center at the University of Texas at Austin, perfectionists have the following characteristics:

- Setting standards beyond reach and reason.
- Never being satisfied by anything less than perfection.
- Becoming depressed when faced with failure or disappointment.
- Being preoccupied with fears of failure and disapproval.
- Seeing mistakes as evidence of unworthiness.
- Becoming overly defensive when criticized.

In contrast, the Counseling Center associates the following characteristics with “Healthy Striving”:

- Setting standards that are high but within reach.
- Enjoying process as well as outcome.
- Bouncing back quickly from failure or disappointment.
- Keeping normal anxiety and fear of failure within bounds.
- Seeing mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning.
- Reacting positively to helpful criticism.

**Myths and Realities about Perfectionism**

The Vick Center for Strategic Advising & Career Counseling Blog, University of Texas at Austin, identifies the following myths and realities about perfectionism:

**MYTH:** I wouldn't be as successful if I weren't such a perfectionist.

**REALITY:** There is no evidence that perfectionists are more successful than their non-perfectionistic counterparts. In fact, there is evidence that given similar levels of talent, skill, and intellect, perfectionists perform less successfully than non-perfectionists.

**MYTH:** Perfectionists get things done, and they do things right.

**REALITY:** Perfectionists tend to be "all or nothing" thinkers. They see events and experiences as either good or bad, perfect or imperfect, with nothing in between. Such thinking often leads to procrastination, because demanding perfection of oneself can quickly become overwhelming. A student who struggles with perfectionism may turn in a paper weeks late (or not at all) rather than on time with
less than perfect sentences. A perfectionist employee may spend so much time agonizing over some noncritical detail that a project misses its deadline.

MYTH: Perfectionists are determined to overcome all obstacles to success.

REALITY: Perfectionistic behavior increases one's vulnerability to depression, writer's block, performance and social anxiety, and other barriers to success. These blocks to productivity and success result from the perfectionist's focus on the final product. Instead of concentrating on the process of accomplishing a task, perfectionists focus exclusively on the outcome of their efforts. This relentless pursuit of the ultimate goal can seriously hinder their efforts.

**Strategies to Overcome Perfectionism**

Increase your awareness of the self-critical nature of all or nothing thoughts and how they extend to other people in your life. Learn to substitute more realistic, reasonable thoughts for habitually critical ones. When you find yourself criticizing a less than perfect performance (whether your own or someone else's), make yourself stop and think about the good parts of that performance. Then ask yourself questions such as: Is it really as bad as I feel it is? How do other people see it? Is it a reasonably good performance for the person(s) and circumstances involved?

Be realistic about what you can do. By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that "imperfect" results do not lead to the punitive consequences you expect and fear. Suppose you swim laps every day for relaxation and exercise. You set yourself the goal of 20 laps, even though you can barely swim 15. If you are a perfectionist, you soon may feel disappointed at your performance and anxious about improving it. Because you're focused on the outcome, you gain little sense of fun or satisfaction from your efforts. You may even give up swimming because you're not "good enough."

A healthier approach would be to tell yourself that 15 laps is good enough for now. So you continue swimming without anxiety. You don't necessarily stop trying to improve, but you swim mainly for exercise and relaxation – for however many laps you can.

Set strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on to another activity. This technique reduces the procrastination that typically results from perfectionism. Suppose you must find references for a term paper and also study for an exam. Set time limits. For example: decide that you will spend only two hours looking up references, then four (and only four) more hours studying for the test. If you stick to your time limits, you won't spend the entire day searching for elusive references, nor try to study late at night when you are too tired to be effective.

Learn how to deal with criticism. Perfectionists often view criticism as a personal attack, which leads them to respond defensively. Concentrate on being more objective about the criticism, and about yourself. Remind yourself that if you stop making mistakes, you also stop learning and growing. Remember that criticism is a natural thing from which to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.
Forgive yourself in your moments of imperfections. You are bound to make mistakes and lots of them in life and every day. Make a habit of forgiving your limitations and your imperfections.

Forgive others’ imperfections. Practice to walk in forgiveness of others around you when they make mistakes. If you walk around judging and criticizing others, you become a source of stress for others. Remember, forgiving others is easier on them and on yourself.

Develop humor. Everything in life and every mistake is not a big deal. See the funny side of things. Humor is relaxing and shows your friendly side.

Learn from mistakes. Mistakes are a great school. Learning from your mistakes allows you to become wiser and more insightful over the long haul.

How to Transform Oneself from Pursuing Perfection to Pursuing Excellence

1. Take the first giant step. Find a worthy cause and take that first step.
2. Mistakes are a good school. Welcome them. Learn from the mistakes you make in the early stages of your action.
3. Try. Try. Try. Give yourself the license to try an action rather than thinking too long about that action.
4. Seek the input of others. Seek input on how you can make things better from diverse sources. It is helpful to hear from your fans as well as your detractors. Your detractors may provide the best input.
5. Considering someone else’s input is huge. Considering is not necessarily agreeing. Weigh all input with open mind.
6. Incorporate input into your actions. The more input you incorporate into your worthy action, the stronger your solution.
7. Celebrate small achievements. This creates forward momentum for your cause.
8. Give credit to those who help you along the way.
9. Walk away from stressful situations.
10. Create joyful moments.

Concluding Remarks

“Perfection is the enemy of good” seems counterintuitive, but extensive research shows it is often the case. Whether you freeze when trying to accomplish important tasks because circumstances are not perfect, or feel anxiety and unworthiness due to perfectionist expectations, you may benefit from pursuing excellence rather than perfection.

Perfectionism can be defined as expecting oneself or others to produce a desired and high quality outcome during the first attempt; while excellence is iteratively working toward producing a valuable outcome. Some terms that are associated with the concept of perfection are: stressful, seeking to
impress, inflexible, intolerant, doubting, judgmental, and control. Some words that are associated with excellence are: useful, improve, iterate, flexible, confidence, and dynamic.

Perfectionist behavior has been the subject of extensive research. Some of the consequences of perfectionist behavior include: performance anxiety, burnout, depression, eating disorders, and even suicide.

Coping strategies to turn from perfectionist behavior to the pursuit of excellence include:

- Increasing your awareness of the self-critical nature of all or nothing thoughts and how they extend to other people in your life.
- Being realistic about what you can do. By setting more realistic goals, you will gradually realize that "imperfect" results do not lead to the punitive consequences you expect and fear.
- Setting strict time limits on each of your projects. When the time is up, move on to another activity.
- Learning how to deal with criticism. Remember that criticism is a natural thing from which to learn, rather than something to be avoided at all costs.
- Forgiving yourself in your moments of imperfections.
- Forgiving others’ imperfections.
- Developing humor.
- Learning from mistakes.

While perfectionism is likely to jeopardize the well-being of individual contributors, teams, and organizations, the pursuit of excellence is likely to benefit all involved.
References


Frank, M. Excellence Vs. Perfection.
https://www.excelatlife.com/articles/excellence.htm


http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/03/06/redefining-excellence-for-todays-world/#776eb4242d85


Greenspon, T. Interview on perfectionism found at
http://www.davidsongifted.org/Search-Database/entry/A10790

Habits for Wellbeing. Excellence Vs. Perfection.
http://www.habitsforwellbeing.com/excellence-vs-perfection/

How to Overcome Perfectionism: 8 Strategies for Making Better Life.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tamar-chansky/perfectionism_b_1556414.html

How to Overcome Perfectionism in Everyday Ways.
http://www.uncommonhelp.me/articles/overcoming-perfectionism/

Myths and Realities About Perfectionism.
https://sites.utexas.edu/ugs-csa/2013/02/01/myths-and-realities-about-perfectionism/
About Gabe Hamda

Gabe Hamda, Ph.D., SPHR, is president and CEO of ICATT Consulting (www.icatt.net). ICATT improves organizational performance through customized training, contract staffing, and system security. Gabe holds a Ph.D. in Instructional System Design from Florida State University. Gabe’s claim to fame is using the power of networking to connect with people who are to his left and to his right wherever he goes. Gabe has a passion for assisting professionals who are unemployed and underemployed and thus volunteers his services providing two of his signature hands-on workshops titled “practicing power networking” and “managing your career.” Gabe is author of the book, You Become What You Say: The Power of Words. He has also authored workshop articles titled The Human Side of Instructional Systems Design; How Thriving is Your Consulting Practice?; It’s Time for a Vision and a Hashtag: Can your Organization Benefit from a Clear Vision and a Matching Hashtag?; Perfection Is the Enemy of Good: Why You May Benefit from Pursuing Excellence Rather than Perfection; and Adding Positivity to Your Expressions: Positive Self-Talk Produces Optimistic Outcomes. Gabe may be reached by email at gabe.hamda@icatt.net.