

Essential tips for working with a perfectionist

Hiring managers often ask potential candidates the age-old question, “What is your greatest weakness?” Trying to frame themselves in as positive a light as possible, interviewees frequently say something about being a bit of a perfectionist. Such a response seems harmless or even beneficial. After all, what employer wouldn’t want to hire a worker who willingly pushes herself to great limits and demands exceptional standards?

When considering the various types of problematic personalities one might encounter in a work environment, dealing with a perfectionist may not sound all that bad. However, actual perfectionists (not just ones who pay lip service during interviews) can cause their share of office chaos.

Take the case of Adele — a perfectionist employed by a New York insurance company. One of Adele’s responsibilities is purchasing office copying machines. Unfortunately, she can’t bring herself to actually buy any copiers. Instead, she constantly tries out different brands. She leases different models every three months and asks people to rate them. Her office is always short of copiers because Adele can’t make up her mind. Coworkers are tired of ranking machines — their only criteria at the moment is permanence!

Or, consider what it is like to work with Ronald. Despite being a pleasant, competent employee, colleagues dread collaborating with him. Why? Others on the team always have to hound him to get his part of the project finished. He will start writing a report well in advance of the due date, but he can’t seem to finish it. Rather, he will keep revising and editing it over and over. His perfectionist tendencies hold up everyone else.

Conscientious, devoted employees are one thing, but perfectionists are quite another. Here’s a look at the difference and what you can do when confronted with the maladaptive behavior of the latter.

What makes someone a perfectionist?

People can do great things when they have the desire to excel. Society values hard work and high standards. Thus, at least on the surface, it may be difficult to distinguish between office superstars and perfectionists. In fact, a lot of perfectionists rise to the managerial level because perfectionism often gets people ahead early in their careers. It may make them crazy and give them ulcers, but the drive to do the job right gets them at least to middle management.

Problems arise when individuals possess an insatiable quest for perfection. The [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) defines perfectionism as “the tendency to demand of others or of oneself an extremely high or even flawless level of performance, in excess of what is required by the situation.” The need to achieve perfection reaches such an extent that it becomes pathological. The person has trouble completing anything and becomes so preoccupied with details that he loses sight of what he is doing.

When good enough is never good enough, others become frustrated. The perfectionist manager may not delegate tasks or give team members enough to do because he does not trust them to perform duties as well as he wants them done. A perfectionist colleague may refuse to share her work until it is absolutely complete according to her own outrageous standards, leaving the rest of her team in the dark. Other perfectionists tell you too much. So afraid of leaving anything out, they snow you under with facts and figures. Then, it is up to you to sort them out.



Other possible signs of perfectionism include:

- Not wanting to take on challenging assignments due to fear of failure.
- Hiding any evidence of imperfection from others, even when errors are small and could easily be fixed.
- Criticizing coworkers for not having high enough standards.
- Viewing feedback and evaluations, even if neutral, as a personal attack.
- Having a hard time letting go of past disappointments.
- Workaholism.
- Procrastination.
- Inability to truly enjoy success.

As hard as such behavior is for others to tolerate, the perfectionist also suffers. It's hard to maintain well-being and not experience burnout when trying to live up to unrealistic expectations. The APA notes that perfectionism is associated with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and other mental health problems. Life becomes endless worrying about always hitting the mark all the time. Failure of any sort makes perfectionists feel unworthy — and believe others will perceive them in that light, too.

People sometimes confuse perfectionism and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). As noted by the [Cleveland Clinic](#), however, the two are not the same: "OCD is a mental health disorder that involves repeated, unwanted

thoughts or urges that cause a person anxiety. In order to reduce that anxiety, the individual performs a compulsive action or ritual — sometimes one that isn't necessarily related to the fear or anxiety that they're trying to overcome. They may understand that what they're doing is irrational but still spend hours a day doing it. OCD is not perfectionism taken to the extreme."

Dealing with a perfectionist employee

Some good news exists for bosses with a perfectionist on their team. Perfectionism oftentimes is much easier to alter than other types of neurotic behavior. Employees who are perfectionists are generally amenable to change because they want to be perfect. They want to be good; they don't want to screw up. If you teach them what you want them to do and how you want them to do it — and break it down into small pieces — perfectionists will try their hardest to learn.

To change a perfectionist team member, take an educational approach:

- Provide structure so that they get things done. One way to deal with perfectionists is to set interim time deadlines. Make it clear that you want to see part of their work by a certain date. Break tasks down into smaller pieces, and check-in with them periodically.
- If the perfectionist just can't finish something, take the matter out of her hands. Say, "OK, I will make this decision for you. Now let's talk about what kept you from making the decision."
- Give a lot of positive feedback. Perfectionism stems from low self-esteem. Perfectionists are constantly trying to be perfect because they feel so unworthy. They're always insecure about how they are doing, even when they're actually doing very well. If you want to get something from a perfectionist, give him a lot of compliments. The reassurance will bolster him and keep him going.

Dealing with a perfectionist boss

Handling a perfectionist can feel especially tricky when that person is a manager. Perfectionist supervisors may criticize everything you do and ask you to do your work over. They may even tell you to do things one way and then, after you are finished, say they really wanted it another way. In order to tolerate this behavior, you have to be secure. You have to be convinced that your work is good, even though you may never hear your manager actually say positive words.

Here are some ways to deal with perfectionist bosses:

- **Memo everything.** Confirm everything that you are told to do in writing. Documentation proves vital if other supervisors or anyone from human resources questions your actions or work ethic.
- **Check-in with your boss regularly.** If he's going to be hovering over your shoulder and checking up on you, check in with him first so you are more in control.
- **Give your boss options.** Tell him how you want to approach a particular project, add a couple of options and ask him to select one. The purpose behind this strategy is to lead him in your direction by providing him with the illusion of choice.

- **If all else fails, put your foot down.** Tell your perfectionist boss that there are limits to what you will take. Begin by identifying his intolerable perfectionist demands, then explain the effect they have on you. Define the consequences if the perfectionist doesn't change. A sample statement might be, "When you pick apart my reports, you make me feel as though I'm doing a bad job. I don't think I can continue doing my job well unless I get the sense that you appreciate my work."

When you're the perfectionist

Recognize perfectionist tendencies in your own behavior? Congratulations on your self-awareness! Perfectionists often have a hard time viewing their actions and outlook as problematic. Acknowledgment can help perfectionists move toward a saner, more fulfilling work life.

Some perfectionists benefit from writing down their perfectionist traits and the downsides of them. Seeing how, say, continuing to work after hours on a report that is already good enough directly correlates with missing family dinners may serve as motivation to change. Journaling similarly provides a safe space to express feelings and reflect on situations.

Perfectionists often fear they will end up as low achievers if they don't shoot impossibly high. If you can witness this worry not happening, the notion may lessen or even eventually disappear. Some experts suggest starting by purposely doing everything imperfectly — but well — for a single day. Realizing that the world did not end can boost confidence — and show you that nobody else was even noticing or judging.

Since perfectionists tend to be highly self-critical, changing one's internal messages can be vital to positive end results. When negativity creeps in, blast it away with a conscious effort to think about things you like about yourself. Likewise, when you find yourself ready to criticize fellow team members, remind yourself of their positive traits.

Need some motivation to change? Think of letting go of perfectionism as a smart career move. You will likely get along better with others when you stop micromanaging their every move and questioning their standards. You'll also become a better candidate for higher positions by avoiding procrastination tendencies and proving you can make confident, timely decisions.

And don't be afraid to seek outside help. Mental health counselors or even career coaches can offer strategies and support in line with your specific situation. Think of it as valuable career advice!