



Perfectionism limits our chances to risk, learn, grow, and succeed

I confess to a degree of perfectionism that used to prevent me from having much-needed conversations for fear of saying the wrong thing or saying it wrong. These days, I just say it and let the chips fall where they may. I encourage you to do the same. It will probably go better than you imagined. And if there are chips, well, keep your shoes on, and no one will get hurt. — Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock

Perfectionism is tough conditioning to shake, and yet doing so is vital to our growth and development. As I grew up, I thought that if I couldn't achieve perfection at something, then I probably shouldn't do it. I was often on the sidelines, working on perfecting any number of endeavors, while others hopped on the bandwagon, fell off, got back on, and seemed to be having a blast in the process.



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One of the best things I've done is to take a comedy improv class. I quickly learned that being rehearsed — perfect — aiming to look good or be intelligent would take me down. The instructor urged us to celebrate our failures, and we did so in order to risk, take action, be present, and move beyond the crippling internal critic.

Getting past our internal critic — changing conversations with ourselves

to encouraging — is essential to good professional development. The chances of innovating are nil when our brain switches into know-it-all mode.

PERFECTIONISM VS. HIGH EXPECTATIONS

What's the difference between perfectionism and high expectations? It's the difference between the teacher, supervisor, or parent who shuts us down with blanket criticism and the one who maintains high expectations with encouragement: "I believe in you, and I know you can do better. Keep practicing."

If I set high expectations for myself, give my best effort, and tell myself it's OK to make mistakes, I will continue to try, move forward, and make progress. Not judging my mistakes will make it more likely that I'll be transparent about my mistakes and not shame others for theirs.

LEARNING IS DERAILED

Sometimes we're so focused on preparing for a perfect outcome that we

forget to create the conditions where learning and growth can thrive.

During a workshop I facilitated, educators shared their ahas on how perfectionism derails learning and development. The message is: "Don't take a risk, don't get it wrong, don't show me something until it's perfect." The message that nothing's ever good enough leads to expected failure.

Practice is about gradual progress, not perfection. Send the message of perfection, and people will shut down. They will move quickly toward anything *but* accountability. They try something once, it doesn't work, so they abandon it. Instill the will and skill in people to practice and change behavior.

Psychology Today's website describes perfectionism this way: "For perfectionists, life is an endless report card on accomplishments or looks. A one-way ticket to unhappiness What makes perfectionism so toxic is that while those in its grip desire success, they are most focused on avoiding failure, so theirs is a negative orientation" (*Psychology Today*, n.d.).

In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2013.

Imagine an organizational culture or a management style under the grip of perfectionism.

Anxiety and fear of failure do not make for a productive learning environment. Instead, they create:

- **Shame and shutdown:** People feel set up to fail rather than to succeed.
- **Rigid, all-or-nothing mindset:** This mindset leads to either having to be the best or not try at all.
- **Cover-your-rear culture:** Because a culture of rigidity inspires blame, we need to point the finger elsewhere.
- **Never-good-enough, hide-your-work culture:** The perception is that nothing's ever good enough for this school, this culture, so why bother giving our best or getting other perspectives on our plans?
- **Cruelty to ourselves and others:** Perfectionism causes us to treat ourselves poorly. We often treat others the way we treat ourselves.
- **Procrastination:** We'll wait until we know how to do it the "right" way.
- **Living life by script:** Rather than engaging in life and learning as they happen, we wait for the scripts in our heads to unfold and are disappointed when they don't.

In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) says that those who reach success often don't achieve it overnight, but through continued effort. The seemingly sudden successes of the cases he cites happened not by inherent talent but with hard, continued work and the motivation to practice, practice, practice.

In school settings, children watch adults, learning by example. Jennifer Drapkin writes in *Psychology Today*, "Perfectionists feel as though the world expects them to be impeccable. In a classroom setting, these are the children who won't try new things because they're scared of looking foolish. ... Since they need to appear perfect, so-called 'socially proscribed' perfectionists almost never ask for help. They keep problems to themselves and let them

fester" (2005). Adult professional learning should further the growth and learning of students, not stifle it.

CHANGE CAN BE MESSY

As my improv instructor said, let's celebrate failure. At a conference I attended, speaker Elliott Masie said failure is necessary to learning and innovation. Encourage people to speak up about their fears. Motivate and encourage others to strive harder. Create support and understanding that change can be messy, scary, and, most of all, that change comes about gradually, then suddenly. Development is a continuum. Celebrate small wins on the way.

A behavioral psychologist once told me that the most effective way to change our mindset is to engage in new behavior. Remind yourself that the tone and tenor of the conversations you have is how you create your environment. Are you motivating or discouraging people? Ask yourself, "Are my conversations instilling a will to learn or shutting it down? Are they punitive or driven out of learning, encouragement, and a genuine desire for progress?"

Our success, individually and collectively, comes down to a willingness to practice and persist, occasionally look foolish, and push forward regardless. Isn't that what we also want to model for students?

Let's equip people with the skills in professional learning and then create a supportive environment of learning, cooperation, collaboration, and a willingness to learn from each other. That encourages people to practice, take risks, and learn from their mistakes. This is good modeling for students as well. After all, learning assumes we don't have all the answers.

I recently watched a video interview between a teacher and principal. At first, the teacher's voice was tentative, seeking approval. In the course of the interview, she began to realize that her principal was learning as much as she was, which gave her permission to not

have all the answers. The teacher's face lit up, her body language changed, and her eyes sparkled. Permission to learn brings joy and energy.

If you're a perfectionist, be present to the impact your internal conversations have on your relationship with yourself and with others and the impact these conversations have on your overall relationships and results.

Here are some things to consider, from an article called "Managing perfectionism":

- Set standards that are high but achievable.
- Enjoy the process, not just the outcome.
- Recover from disappointment quickly.
- Don't be disabled by anxiety and fear of failure.
- View mistakes as opportunities for growth and learning (Center for Creative Counseling, n.d.).

Author and poet Maya Angelou says, "Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it." This doesn't mean there isn't room for growth. Quite the opposite — this gives us room to grow.

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