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Managing Perfectionism In The Workplace

By Ryan Ross

Every office has at least one perfectionist – that person who clings to rules and procedures and expects everyone to follow his or her lead. Perfectionists hold themselves to high standards, are diligent workers, and can help reign in an unruly workplace. However, they can also be viewed as controlling, overly critical, or as micromanagers in the eyes of subordinates and colleagues. When tired, bored, or under increased pressure, these perfectionist qualities can become detrimental to their performance, negatively impacting their own work and that of others.

Traditionally, psychologists and business experts alike have viewed perfectionism as a purely maladaptive construct. Research conducted by

Jeff Foster and Steve Nichols of Hogan Assessment Systems, however, challenges this perception and provides an in-depth exploration of the results of perfectionism in the workplace. Their findings, which are described below, show that perfectionism may result in both positive and negative outcomes.¹

Three types of perfectionism

One must first define perfectionism to understand it and its effect in the workplace. According to Hewitt and Flett's 1991 publication *Perfectionism in the Self and Social Contexts: Conceptualization, Assessment, and Association with Psychology*, there are three main forms of perfectionism: self-oriented, other-oriented, and self-prescribed.²

Individuals who display self-oriented

perfectionism tend to have unrealistic standards for themselves. In striving to meet these standards, they can be overly self-critical and focus excessively on their own flaws. Although this pattern of behavior can produce negative consequences, researchers have also found that the high personal and organizational standards exhibited by those with high perfectionism are also associated with healthy experiences. Those displaying self-oriented perfectionism are good at making career decisions because they are good at self-appraisal, goal selection, making plans for the future, and problem solving. Self-oriented perfectionism is often indicative of several other positive qualities, such as high self-esteem, self-efficacy, resourcefulness, perceiving controls, adaptive learning

¹Foster, J., & Nichols, S. (2009). *The pros and cons of perfectionism in the workplace*. Research paper. Hogan Assessment Systems.

²Hewitt, P.L., & Flett, G.L. (1991, vol. 60, no. 3). Perfectionism in the self and social contexts: conceptualization, assessment, and association with psychology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pp 456-470.

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strategies, strong academic performance, and altruistic social attitudes. However, when under increased stress, perfectionists can become caught up in the details and sacrifice productivity, turning these advantages into crippling career derailleurs.

Other-oriented perfectionism describes individuals who have unrealistic standards and expectations about the abilities of people around them. People who display this characteristic are often overly evaluative of others' performance. They not only hold others to unrealistic standards, but also may be overly critical when these standards are not met. Other-oriented perfectionism has been associated with an elevated level of assertiveness, which can damage interpersonal relationships both inside and outside the office. The positive side, however, is that other-oriented perfectionists believe others are capable of achieving success and will push them to do so.

Socially prescribed perfectionism results when individuals believe others have perfectionist expectations directed at them. Unlike characteristics associated with self-oriented perfectionism, where an individual maintains high standards at all times to avoid letting him- or herself down, the socially prescribed perfectionist is motivated by a fear of disappointing others. These individuals believe they will be valued only if they produce nothing less than perfect work. Although individuals who display characteristics associated with socially prescribed perfectionism can be astute at knowing what is expected of them, this tendency often leads to the feeling that they must always do better than before.

The impact of perfectionism in the workplace

Whatever the cause, perfectionists tend to be overly concerned with mistakes, which can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Hogan studies the impact of personality on workplace performance using the Hogan Development Survey (HDS). The HDS is an assessment that indexes behavioral tendencies that can emerge and negatively impact performance, especially when an individual is fatigued, ill, stressed, bored, or lacking social vigilance. The HDS measures these tendencies along 11 scales: Excitable, Skeptical, Cautious, Reserved, Leisurely, Bold, Mischievous, Colorful, Imaginative, Diligent, And Dutiful. Hogan measures perfectionism using the HDS Diligent scale, which assesses the degree to which a person is picky, critical, or overly conscientious. Low scores on this

scale suggest that individuals are relaxed, tolerant, and willing to delegate. High scores suggest that individuals are resistant to change, may micromanage others, can become overly stubborn and slow to make decisions when under pressure, and tend to focus too much on irrelevant details while ignoring the overall goals of a project.

Hogan's research shows that perfectionists' meticulous nature may be useful and even important in many situations. They are likely to be good with details and strictly adhere to the rules. They are strong role models who strive to uphold the highest standards of professionalism in their workplace and display positive characteristics, like being orderly, attentive to details, and fastidious.

In contrast, perfectionists often have trouble prioritizing their work and believe that every task needs to be done equally well, even when that is impossible. In their quest to ensure everything is done right, they often have trouble delegating responsibilities, which in turn deprives their subordinates of the opportunity to learn and grow. Their resistance to change suggests they will rarely be a source of true innovation. At their worst, perfectionists can be fussy, particular, nit-picking micromanagers who deprive their subordinates of any choice or control over their own work. Such behaviors alienate their staff members and may cause them to refuse to take any initiative, instead waiting to be told what to do and how they should do it.

How perfectionists are viewed by peers, supervisors, and themselves

To further examine the relationship between perfectionism and job performance ratings, Hogan researchers used the extensive data collected in the Hogan archive, a collection

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of data from more than two million assessments covering hundreds of jobs and industries. Also included are results from more than 300 criterion-related validity studies conducted over the last 30 years and representing a wide range of jobs, organizations, and industries.

To examine the impact of perfectionism on a variety of work outcomes, Hogan used meta-analysis to determine statistical relationships between scores on the Diligent scale and job-performance ratings on a variety of competencies. Job-performance ratings included appraisals by supervisors, peers, and study participants. The competencies that workers were rated on represent behaviors critical for success across a wide variety of jobs. Examples include goal setting, teamwork, dependability,

report performance ratings were positively correlated with perfectionism, indicating that perfectionists tend to view themselves as good performers across a variety of work areas, with the one exception being the area of stress tolerance. In contrast, when considering both supervisor and peer ratings, the direction of the relationships varied by competency, although a majority of significant relationships were negative.

For example, perfectionists are likely to rate themselves high on financial acumen, indicating that they are good at working with equations, understanding complex financial information and forecasting future business and market trends. However, supervisors and peers disagreed with this assessment, demonstrating much less confidence in the financial acumen of perfectionists. This same general pattern is also found in the areas of

and its relation to specific job ratings have suggested – that supervisors and peers alike view perfectionism as producing both positive and negative outcomes.

Getting the most from perfectionists

The secret to getting the most from perfectionist employees is to provide them with proper coaching to help them overcome their more negative attributes. Consider the following strategies for managing perfectionists.

Good enough is as valuable as perfect

One of the most important lessons perfectionists can benefit from learning is that the best solution might not always be the most effective. In their attempts to achieve perfection, they may spend too much time working on a single task,

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interpersonal skills, and trustworthiness.

As expected, the results of the study demonstrate how perfectionism can affect different areas of job performance in both positive and negative ways. In addition, these relationships often varied depending on who was rating performance. For example, scores on the Hogan Development Survey's Diligent Scale were positively related to ratings of initiative provided by supervisors and peers but did not show a strong relationship with self ratings of initiative. This shows that although coworkers are more likely to view perfectionists as driven and focused, perfectionists themselves are more likely to feel they are motivated by other factors such as a fear of negative appraisals by others.

Interestingly, the majority of self-

dependability, leadership, risk management, and valuing diversity. Additionally, scores resulting from ratings on the Diligent Scale were negatively related to supervisory ratings in areas such as motivating others, negotiation, and stress tolerance. However, self-report, supervisor, and peer ratings tended to agree that perfectionists perform better than average in competencies related to initiative, service orientation, and planning and organization. Although all three raters are in agreement in these areas, perfectionists tend to have an inflated view of themselves when it comes to certain competencies.

In general, Hogan's results indicate that, in many cases, the competencies that perfectionists view as their own strengths are seen as problem areas by others. This confirms what previous research on perfectionism

tinkering around until it meets their high standards. In addition to detracting from other projects, they often neglect to ask for help from others and miss out on the benefits a different perspective can offer. They need to recognize that spending too much time on minute details can actually be damaging. Instead, by learning to let go before becoming bogged down, they can be more productive.

Getting priorities in order

Many still expound the belief that it is possible in today's fast-paced, information-rich world to get everything done. Instead, perfectionists should consider a new mantra – that it is not possible to get everything done, so they must make important choices regarding how to spend their time. Understanding that it is

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impossible to do everything on their own can help perfectionists realize the value of delegating tasks to others, which in turn, will enable them to better organize their own priorities.

The value of delegating assignments

As perfectionists learn that they can't and shouldn't give every single task their full attention, they will begin to understand the value of delegating tasks to others. However, as perfectionists may have difficulty fully letting go of certain projects, it is crucial they learn to let their colleagues apply their own ideas and strategies. Furthermore, because perfectionists are likely to be just as critical of others as they are of themselves, they should be encouraged to avoid criticizing colleagues whose work is less than perfect.

The 80-20 rule of productivity

The Pareto Principle states that for many events, roughly 80 percent of the effects come from 20 percent of the causes. Although this statement is mostly used to describe economics and sales situations, it can also be applied to how employees spend their day. Perfectionists should be reminded that of all the things they do during the day, only 20 percent of their work produces 80 percent of their results. Therefore, they should learn to identify and focus their energies on the most important work, rather than spreading themselves too thin by paying equal attention to everything.

Staying calm under pressure

Perfectionists are likely to become anxious or high-strung when stressed. As such, they should be coached to remain relaxed and positive even when faced with important deadlines and other work stressors. Stress can often be a vicious cycle for the perfectionist; the more stress they face, the less productive they become, which ultimately causes more stress. The same scenario holds true when perfectionists interact with others; micromanaging subordinates and hounding them about deadlines will stress their colleagues out and create even more disruption. Therefore, perfectionists should learn how to stay calm and relaxed, even when under tight deadlines or dealing with other stressful situations. This will help them not only handle their own workload, but also better deal with the workload of others.

Viewing work more positively

One of the main factors affecting a perfectionist's work is the belief that work that is less than perfect will be criticized. Although this motivates them to be highly detail oriented and produce high-quality results, the need for perfection distracts from more important objectives. Perfectionists should be challenged to replace these negative beliefs with a more compassionate view. Getting them to understand that perfection is neither realistic nor expected of them is crucial. In addition, they should be reminded that focusing on doing the best they can within time and budget constraints should be their main concern.

Perfectionists have plenty of qualities that make them assets to any organization. However, the same attributes that can be strengths in most situations can be disruptive when an individual is overwhelmed or facing increased stress. Understanding that perfectionism is a complex characteristic that can lead to both positive and negative outcomes in the workplace is a crucial step in managing a perfectionist's performance.

Understanding perfectionists is the key to managing them

Perfectionists have plenty of qualities that make them assets to any organization. However, the same attributes that can be strengths in most situations can be disruptive when an individual is overwhelmed or facing increased stress. Understanding that perfectionism is a complex characteristic that can lead to both positive and negative outcomes in the workplace is a crucial step in managing a perfectionist's performance.

When negative behaviors do emerge, the results can be disastrous. Because perfectionists tend to stress over minute details of every task, they limit their productivity. And the negative aspects of perfectionism don't just affect one individual. When perfectionists micromanage their colleagues, or fail to delegate tasks, the productivity of an entire department or company can be impeded. As a result, it is up to the manager to recognize who among their staff displays perfectionist tendencies and ensure those individuals receive the proper coaching and development to maximize their performance.

As vice president of Global Alliances at Hogan, Ryan Ross is a renowned authority on talent assessment for employee selection and leadership development. This article is based on the previously referenced research paper The Pros and Cons of Perfectionism in the Workplace by Jeff Foster, Hogan's director of research and development, and Steve Nichols, research consultant. For more information about Hogan, visit www.hoganassessments.com.