

Perfectionism can Be the Enemy to Productivity

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Productivity defines different indicators of efficient efficiency. A productivity measure is often expressed as the ratio of aggregate output to a single input or an aggregate input used in a production process, i.e. output per input unit, usually over a specified period. Productivity isn't about getting more done. Productivity is about what you get done. Three perfectionism factors can interfere with your ability to prioritize the most important tasks.

1. You're reluctant to mark decisions as not important

There is an argument you should either decide quickly or outsource the decision for unimportant decisions.

Yet perfectionists have trouble in classifying choices as unimportant. They just like being in charge of everything. Why? For what? Since they are more affected by imperfections than others are. If something goes wrong, perfectionists may feel explosive anger or a niggling sense of annoyance that is hard to overlook, so they don't want to take the chance.

Perfectionists are also so used to micromanaging that they are not often guilty of any decision being unimportant. To it they are blind. They generally recognize anything as deserving of their full effort.

Solution: Fatigue in decision making can be serious in everyday life. A perfectionist can learn to enjoy giving up the power of those choices if they pay attention to how wonderful it feels to be free from the pressure of taking decisions. Start using heuristics to assess or assign quickly with the hope that overall, but not flawless, you'll get a lot quicker and pretty good decision. One of my heuristics, for example, is: if I have been thinking about doing something three times, I can get on with it and do it without further deliberation.

1. You feel practically bound to overdeliver.

In any case, the idea that you need to meet expectations will manifest in several ways.

Let's presume someone is giving you \$2,000 for service. For a perfectionist, it may not seem like enough to offer \$2,000 in interest. You may think you need to offer \$2,700 for what your rivals will charge because you want to perform better. You think: "If I don't deliver too much, then I'm underdelivering."

And if you decide that 24 hours is a reasonable period for responding to an e-mail from a colleague, you can set your own bar within six hours. The main point is that you don't think what's socially fair applies to you and your own norm needs to be different.

Perhaps this line of thought comes from having an unrealistic cushion; you think, for example, "if I want to provide Zx or Zxy value for all the services I provide, then I can never under-deliver." It may also be motivated by fear, insecurity or imposter syndrome; for example, by constantly meeting expectations, you believe the only way to avoid someone from being upset or dissatisfied with you is to. Perfectionists may often fear that if they fail to over-deliver, disastrous repercussions will arise; for example, they worry that a customer may not continue to work with them if they take a day to respond to an email request, even though it's a non-urgent question and they're satisfied with everything else.

Solution: Have a strategy on how to change course if you encounter these patterns of thought. To always reach for outperformance understand what it costs you. What else will you not have time, money, care and willpower for? Maybe it's your own wellbeing, big goals or family. When you think the costs are big, try to have a thumb rule when you're going to over-deliver. For example, you may decide you will, but not in the other seven, in three out of ten circumstances where you have the urge to do so.

Specific perceptual patterns will benefit you too. For example, if a writer sends me more than six questions for an article they're working on, I'll usually answer six or so questions in detail, and either answer or skip the others minimally. (I probably offer better responses using this technique as I focus on the areas where I have the most interesting things to say)

1. You get excessively irritated when you're not 100% matched with healthy habits.

When perfectionists try to adopt new patterns, they appear to collapse into one of three. They bite off more than they can chew and their plans are too onerous to manage; they stop beginning any habit until they are 100% confident they can reach their target regularly, which contributes to procrastination; or they just take on certain behaviours that they can stick to regardless.

Flexibility is a symbol of mental wellbeing. You need the freedom to take a day off the gym when you're sick or just got off a late flight, even if that means breaking a run. You should also be able to step away from behaviours that were once important to the growth of your productivity or skills but that you have outgrown. You promised to always post three days a week, maybe as a beginning writer, but now that's burning you out or, as a new real estate investor, you've always attended a monthly meeting, but now you're getting nothing out of that.

Often the more disciplined conduct looks like the less disciplined one. But when modern self-discipline is an expectation, it may hold back the perfectionists.

Solution: Have a system in place to ensure that you don't stick to a pattern merely because you worship at the altar of self-discipline. If you have never missed a workout in two years (or some other habit), it is possible that there were days when it wasn't the best use of your time to get it done. Evaluate the opportunity cost of any actions or habits that you diligently do to make sure that they are actually using your physical and mental resources to the best advantage.

Perfectionism is also motivated by striving for perfection, but it can be self-sabotaging if it contributes to suboptimal actions such as maintaining behaviours beyond their utility, over-delivering when you don't

have to, or overthinking any decision you create.

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