

The Pursuit of Excellence in a Culture of Perfection

by Jessie Spressart and Johnna G. Story

Paradoxically, perfectionism hinders positive professional development, productivity, and well-being and is damaging both to individuals and organizations. Here's how PD professionals can make a difference.

Michael Sanchez is a promising mid-level litigation associate whose practice is focused on general business litigation. He was his high school's valedictorian, went to a top state school for undergrad, and then to a tier one law school, where he graduated in the top 5% of his class. Following a judicial clerkship where his writing skills were commended, he joined a well-known regional firm and settled down to build his practice and advance to the partnership level as quickly as possible. Early in his tenure, he even got to work on an amicus brief for the Supreme Court. All was going well until Michael hit a roadblock: his high hours did not reflect his level of productivity, he was missing deadlines, and he seemed to be on the verge of burnout. What was going on? Firm leadership was mystified and frustrated. Michael was exhausted and worried about his career.

We all know lawyers like Michael — high achievers who seem to be naturals at everything, have impressive academic records, and come to the firm with an appetite for success. Somewhere along the way, they seem to veer off course or stop progressing altogether. Their early promise and ascendant star seem to dim without rhyme or reason.

While there are many possible explanations for these issues, Michael's roadblock was his perfectionism. His high-achieving personality, the SCOTUS brief he worked on, and the high standards of his clerkship combined to convince him that each

and every brief — regardless of whether it merited bet-the-company stakes or not — deserved the full SCOTUS work-up. He eventually was spending ten times the number of hours necessary to get every brief to this level of perfection, which meant not having enough time for all of the other work on his plate. Michael was working 16-hour days, billing only 10 of those, and falling more and more behind.

The Perfectionism Trap

Perfectionists, as defined by psychologist David Burns in 1980, are “those whose standards are well beyond reach or reason, people who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.”

In many high-stakes, high-profile professions, there is a perception that perfection is the standard to achieve — both internally and externally. In the legal world, where decisions can impact individuals' lives, companies' livelihoods, and the laws that govern society, this perception is even more magnified. Perfectionism seems like a good thing. Who wouldn't want to achieve perfection, particularly when delivering services to clients? And yet, pursuing or expecting perfection rarely yields it, and much more often leads to undesirable consequences.

When Burns wrote his article for *Psychology Today* nearly 40 years ago, he reported on a study he conducted of law students from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. A majority of students in the study were observed to have perfectionistic tendencies. While the school considered these students to be the cream of the crop, when the students found themselves among other high performers, some began to realize that they could never be “the best,” which led to frustration, anger, and even panic — leading many of them to express a desire to leave school.

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Since then, much has been written about perfectionism and the demonstrated links to mental health issues like stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout. Recent studies show that perfectionism has become more prevalent over time, although the reasons why are still being explored. As we continue to grapple with the mental health crisis in our profession, we cannot ignore the detrimental impact that perfectionism has on lawyers at all levels.

Researchers have identified three main types of perfectionism:

- **Self-oriented:** these individuals adhere to strict self-imposed standards while maintaining strong motivation to attain perfection and avoid failure. These perfectionists engage in stringent self-evaluation. They are overly self-critical and demonstrate an inability to accept their own mistakes or faults. This desire to avoid failure is tied up with their self-worth — as if, by failing at something (failure being anything short of perfect), they are worthless as human beings.
- **Other-oriented:** these individuals set unrealistic standards for others and engage in a stringent evaluation of others’ performances. This type of perfectionist is unable to delegate

tasks for fear of being disappointed by a less-than-perfect performance. And they will be overly critical with feedback as a way to try to “bring others up to my level” — a tactic that rarely succeeds.

- **Socially prescribed:** these individuals believe that others hold unrealistic expectations of them — expectations that cannot possibly be met. They perceive an external pressure to be perfect in order to gain approval from others, and they believe that others evaluate them critically. This can lead to feelings of anger toward those perceived to have unrealistically high standards, depression if those perceived high standards are not met, or social anxiety due to a fear of being judged by others.

It is possible to exhibit perfectionistic tendencies relating to one or more of these three types. It is also possible not to suffer from perfectionism but to be affected by it because others are perfectionists. We see all of these types of perfectionism in law schools and law firms in countless ways — high achievers at all levels who are afraid to act for fear of failure and who are incapable of seeing their imperfections because to do so shatters their sense of self-worth. Senior attorneys with unrealistic standards of associates and others — standards they could not have achieved themselves at those lower levels — are unreasonably hard on up-and-coming attorneys who may be suffering from perfectionism themselves. And, more and more, we see attorneys who are blinded by the need to appear perfect and lose sight of what is healthy behavior and what is not.

Somewhat paradoxically, the need to achieve the impossible goal of perfection is a driver of less productivity and actually hinders positive development in perfectionists’ careers and lives. Perfectionism in a context of zero tolerance for mistakes leads to various coping mechanisms, such as procrastination and avoidance. The perfectionist thinks, “If I never finish this project, it can’t be critiqued or be less than stellar.” You can’t screw up what you haven’t started! Perfectionists become self-defeating because they don’t strive for their best work but rather for an impossible ideal. For law firm associates, this results in

behaviors such as cutting hours and saying no to more work — work that one needs to do and learn from in order to advance.

So, what is to be done? As with most things, acknowledging the issue is the first step. Attributes of perfectionism are often prized by lawyers, practice groups, and firms. The drive to achieve *perfection* is seen as a good thing, rather than a potential roadblock. Indeed, there can be positive aspects of perfectionism, such as attention to detail, thoroughness, and a deep commitment to work. How does one maintain these positive traits while minimizing the more challenging ones like intractability, a hyperfocus on minutiae that don't matter, an inability to prioritize or delegate, an all-or-nothing attitude, and a tendency to treat every task with the same amount of focus, whether a mundane administrative task or a high-stakes assignment? Moving from a fixed to a growth mindset can do this.

According to researcher Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, those with a *fixed mindset* believe their abilities and intelligence are fixed traits and therefore cannot change. Those with a *growth mindset*, however, have an underlying belief that their learning and intelligence can grow with time and experience. Moving from the fixed mindset of perfection to a growth mindset of excellence is critical to letting go of perfection's painful and damaging effects. This does not mean lowering standards or slacking off; rather, it means consciously turning away from unreasonable demands and toward achievable goals.

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Many perfectionists fear that if they give up the unreasonable demands of perfectionism, they will suddenly be merely average — as if being perfect defines their capabilities or

capacity to perform on the job. However, research has shown that performance and perfectionism are not related to each other — perfectionists are not better or worse performers than non-perfectionists. And if a perfectionist's performance is not inherently better, then excellence can be pursued through such achievable goals as meeting deadlines, working to budget, and delegating effectively without perfectionist tendencies.

Shifting the Mindset

How does one move from a fixed mindset of perfection to a growth mindset of the pursuit of excellence?

For the self-oriented perfectionist, acknowledging that mistakes and missteps will happen won't be easy, but being able to reframe mistakes as learning opportunities instead of failures is a critical first step. Once that shift occurs, the perfectionist can start to set reasonable and realistic goals, rather than impractical and unattainable ones. A focus only on the end result may even be able to be replaced with a view that progress along the way represents multiple points of success. As a result, anxiety and stress-inducing behavior are greatly reduced, allowing for a more peaceful and mindful workplace.

For the other-oriented perfectionist, moving toward excellence from perfection may be more difficult. Being able to delegate with confidence and believe that others will do their best work won't come easy to someone who has set impossible standards. But what if this person starts to see projects and assignments as teaching opportunities rather than as a test of capability? A perfectionist who can reframe another's mistakes as an opportunity to teach can become a true mentor with whom everyone will want to work. These types of perfectionists must become approachable and able to partner with others in achieving a successful outcome.

For socially-prescribed perfectionists, the fixed/growth mindset framework is important but more challenging to define, particularly because the expectations they feel they need to measure up to are not their own. Regardless of how well they

do, they believe they will fall short. This type of perfectionism is the fastest growing, especially among the millennial generation.

In a fixed mindset focused on perfection, socially-prescribed perfectionists will view others as potential critics and sources of rejection and need to appear strong, often at the expense of their well-being. Growth mindset-oriented pursuers of excellence, on the other hand, choose to see others as partners in the achievement of goals; they recognize when they need help and they ask for it, despite the fear of not living up to others' expectations. As Brené Brown writes in *The Gifts of Imperfection*, "Healthy striving is self-focused: 'How can I improve?' [Socially-prescribed] Perfectionism is other-focused: 'What will they think?'"

Coaching the Shift

Understanding what perfectionism is and how it manifests itself is all well and good, but how do we actually move forward, particularly in an industry that is high-stakes and competitive, and where mistakes can have significant consequences? How do we relate to and support others who are perfectionists if we are not? Not all perfectionists want to change; some will never come to understand that they have such tendencies, and it will fall to others to manage around them. It can be difficult, but necessary, to adjust one's own working style to meet the demands of perfectionist colleagues with unrealistic standards for themselves or others. And how do we coach those who do want to change into healthier practices and the growth mindset of excellence? Here are some suggestions on how to coach perfectionists and help them move into the growth mindset of excellence:

Encourage self-awareness: Help perfectionists pay attention to their triggers. Probe what causes them to react with perfectionistic tendencies: Is it a fear of failure? Lack of clarity around expectations? Concern that others cannot meet their expectations? Once triggers are identified, perfectionists create new habits and behaviors that will move them away from the old,

unhelpful flashpoints. For example, when the urge to procrastinate sets in, coach them to set specific goals and deadlines to make progress on a project. Tackling change incrementally is another way to build new habits. If delegation is an issue, coach them to make it a point to delegate one new task or project per week until the habit of delegation becomes more comfortable and better established.

Cultivate self-compassion: Mistakes will happen — they are unavoidable. When a mistake is made, help the attorney separate the mistake from their self-worth. Encourage them to resist the all-or-nothing thinking trap of "I failed at this therefore I am a failure," and to reject self-bullying thoughts like "how could I be so stupid?" or "I am worthless." Instead, deploy strategies to help this type of perfectionist avoid ruminating on mistakes or perceived missteps. Help the attorney recount their successes and strengths — cultivating an evidence-based reaction that the mistake or misstep is not the defining moment of their career or their life, and that they have much more in the "plus" column than the "minus" column.

Know the point of diminishing returns: Striving to do *your* best work is different from striving to achieve *the* best work. Athletes know that at a certain point continuing to train and practice will not yield a better performance or result in competition. *The* best — a perfect 10 — is virtually impossible, and yet they know that they will strive to do *their* best. In the same way, when working with attorneys to address their perfectionistic tendencies, help them recognize the cost of working past the point of diminishing returns and help them identify ways to resist doing so. This could start with something as simple as time limits. Encourage them to set a reasonable time limit on a project, then get feedback on the work done so far.

Shifting the Culture

We — PD professionals — are the front lines in being able to recognize these issues. It is important to pay attention to the dangers of perfectionism in our attorneys and students so that they can continue to grow and thrive in their careers. We can intervene before they stall and burn out.

We see self-oriented perfectionist associates who are working too hard and cutting their hours, and we see the other-oriented perfectionist partners who focus on criticism over teaching. We see socially-prescribed perfectionist law students who can't figure out which firm to work for without over-analyzing how their choice will look to their peers and family.

Without acknowledging the damage that a culture of perfectionism can cause and committing to changing that culture, the legal industry will never make progress in resolving the increasing well-being challenges we face. On an organizational level, how can we, particularly those of us in law firms, encourage excellence and approach these challenges of perfectionism?

Cultivate a culture of experimentation and innovation: Recognize that true innovation requires failures and mistakes as steps toward continuous improvement. Perfectionists often are resistant to change — they do very well with what they know but are wary of trying something new in case it doesn't work. The fear of looking bad or being perceived as a failure inhibits innovation. In a culture where perfectionism is prevalent, the willingness to try and possibly fail is lacking.

Pay attention to feedback: Because perfectionists fear — and anticipate — rejection when they are found to be imperfect, they tend to react poorly and defensively to constructive feedback. Feedback must focus on improvement and look forward. A focus on past mistakes isn't feedback — it's criticism. A focus on future improvement — what was learned from the past mistake and what can be done better next time — is far more productive. Feedback should never be withheld; rather, it should be given with proper care and consideration. And we need to encourage this forward-looking focus, not just in formal evaluation processes but with informal and day-to-day feedback as well.

Be open about the culture of perfectionism: Perfectionism has a detrimental effect on both individuals and organizations, as we have discussed. As the legal industry grapples with issues around well-being, including anxiety, depression, and burnout,

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we cannot ignore the part that culture plays. As we implement solutions involving awareness, coaching, and training, we are headed to a broader culture change. A collective shift from the fixed mindset of perfectionism to the growth mindset of excellence will be like a rising tide, lifting all boats.

This culture change will have a positive impact. And it starts with individuals like Michael, and with firms like his. Through coaching, Michael was able to recognize that his level of attention and thoroughness was excessive, and that it was having a negative impact on him personally and on his contributions to the firm. He set a goal of working only three hours on an assignment that shouldn't take much longer than that, and then asked a trusted colleague for feedback — which was very positive. Michael soon came to realize that he needed to let go of his perfectionism in order to progress. He recognized that he couldn't keep up his current pace and still be successful. Now Michael's goal is excellence — one that he continues to achieve with his firm's support.

Resources:

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About the Authors



Jessie Spressart, Managing Director of Optia Consulting, brings over a decade of experience in talent management and law firm professional development to her practice. She understands the challenges that face lawyers and other professionals in all stages of their careers, and how both internal and external factors affect

professional well-being. She now advises attorneys and other professionals at all levels on how to identify and move past obstacles as they navigate their careers in a healthy, affirming, goal-oriented manner.

Prior to founding Optia, Jessie worked with a premier sales enablement firm specializing in helping "doer-sellers" learn and apply the fundamentals of business development to their practices. She has worked with mid- and large-size companies as well as solo practitioners to help them identify ideal business development activities to help them develop their practices.

Jessie is an executive coach and consultant. She holds Master's degrees from Fordham University and St. Andrews University, and a B.A. from Roberts Wesleyan College. She can be reached at jessie@optiaconsulting.com.



Johnna G. Story is the Senior Professional Development Manager at Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner, LLP, a world-wide IP firm headquartered in Washington, DC. Johnna began her career in law firm professional development at the firm over 20 years ago. In that time, she has managed all aspects of

attorney professional development, including working closely with practice group leaders and firm management to identify training needs and develop innovative and impactful programs for attorneys and partners at all levels and for the technical specialists, student associates, and patent agents at the firm. Johnna oversees a recently revamped attorney review process based on new research and best practices in the field.

Johnna is committed to supporting her colleagues in their professional development and has done so by being an active member of the PDC, serving as a member of the PDC Membership Committee and the PDC Board. She is also the current leader of the Washington, DC, PDC Local Group. Johnna regularly attends the NALP PDI and PDC conferences for the fantastic opportunities to network with her professional contacts and friends, and to stay abreast of new developments in the field. She can be reached at johnna.story@finnegan.com.