

Helping lawyers overcome the perfectionist trap

By Alison Clayton-Smith

A lawyer I once coached dropped out of running races in her personal life unless she had done enough training to do a good time. In her work life she was often afraid to speak 'off the cuff' in case what she said was wrong. Lawyers seem particularly prone to perfectionism. How can we, as training and development professionals, help them to recognise that perfectionism does not always lead to an effective lawyer?

Perfectionist origins

We only need to think about the legal mind and the nature of the profession to appreciate that lawyers are likely to have leanings towards perfectionism. Lawyers are:

- taught to focus on the detail and facts
- concerned with getting the best argument possible, or getting the correct wording in a document
- aware of the difference a comma in the wrong place can make

At the same time, getting into the legal profession is a competitive business and requires strong academics. Lawyers are typically high achievers who are used to being successful and being rewarded for that success.

The consequences for law firms

Firstly, there are positive consequences to perfectionist behaviours. For instance individuals will be keen to make sure they have been thorough in their research and the advice given is sound. There are unlikely to be emails with spelling mistakes. Attention to planning for every eventuality means that nasty surprises are less likely to occur. And of course, not all lawyers necessarily lean towards perfectionism.

For those that do and for whom perfectionism is an overriding way of behaving – that is where individuals feel unable to do anything less than 'perfect' – they may find themselves:

- afraid to speak out in meetings, do presentations, network with clients
- spending too long on things with the result that clients are charged too much (or that time has to be written off) and work-life balance becomes an issue
- avoiding taking risks and innovating
- preferring to do the work themselves rather than delegate to others who they think may not do as good a job

Alison Clayton-Smith
Growing Insights

- and when they do delegate, they tell the person exactly what to do and how to do it rather than coach them

Where someone attaches their self-esteem to their achievements, the ability to accept failure, or 'just doing ok', is an issue.

What can we do?

Often individuals have very strong beliefs based on their life experiences which are leading them into unhelpful perfectionism. Coaching can be a way of helping someone to recognise this. In a coaching situation we might:

- Challenge them to consider whether everything they do has to be 100% right. What things don't need to be perfect?
- Get them to define what being perfect looks like. How do they know it is perfect? Help them to understand what the implications of this are. What is the difference between 'excellent' and 'perfect'?
- Ask them to look at others around them and see if they can learn anything from other people's behaviours.
- Help them to focus on what the benefits would be of focusing on 'ok'.
- Get them to review times when they have failed at something. How did they react? What were the consequences?
- Encourage them to identify some small risks they could take, perhaps outside of work first.

I coached someone who had time management issues. She considered herself (proudly) to be a perfectionist but she also wanted work-life balance. In her mind everything had to be done perfectly. She would rather be late with something than feel she had done a less than perfect job. We looked at what aspects of her job might be done a little less than perfect and what this would mean. She observed other people who she thought were high performers and noted in what areas they spent less energy and time. We also considered what would happen if she unexpectedly found she could not come to work because she avoided delegating.

Aside from coaching individuals, we could include discussion on perfectionism as part of the training for supervisors and partners.

Finally...

Helping lawyers deal with unhelpful perfectionism can be challenging. Time and small steps are required. However by working on this issue we are tackling some of the underlying behaviours that challenge law firms in managing their people and providing excellent client service.

Please note:

All rights are reserved by the author of this article to reproduce it and adapt it for other use.