

YOUR EXECUTIVE CAREER

# To Keep Your Job, Quit Trying to Be Perfect

## The Pursuit of Perfection Can Derail a Career; 'It's Like Being an Alcoholic'

Setting high standards for yourself and associates sounds like a surefire way to succeed. Not always, however.

Executives aiming for perfect performance risk an imperfect career. Some perfectionist bosses fail to complete tasks quickly and evoke subordinates' resentment by requiring flawless execution.

Individuals who prefer getting everything right tend to pay a lot of attention to detail, orderliness and schedules because they fear failure, experts say. But the habit can put them in danger of demotions or job loss.

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Paul Laudicina, a partner at management consultancy A.T. Kearney, learned to rein in his perfectionist tendencies. *A.T. Kearney Inc.*

"Being a perfectionist is a bigger derailer for executives than a decade ago" says David Dotlich, a leadership coach and co-author of the new book "The Unfinished Leader." "That's because management structures are flatter and business conditions are changing faster," he continues.

You can't eliminate a personality trait. Yet smart strategies may help modulate your pursuit of perfection.

"It's like being an alcoholic," explains Paul Laudicina, a partner at A.T. Kearney Inc. While running the management consultancy, he enlisted a coach's assistance in managing his perfectionist tendencies. "You're never cured of being a perfectionist. You're basically just in remission," adds Mr. Laudicina, who studied for the priesthood.

Kevin Cashman, senior partner for CEO and executive development at recruiters [Korn/Ferry International](#), KFY -0.77% coached Mr. Laudicina for 18 months until he stepped down as A.T. Kearney's managing partner in 2012. Perfectionist leaders operate "under the delusion that they are being efficient, but they are not," warns Mr. Cashman, author of "The Pause Principle."

Among other things, Mr. Laudicina says that Mr. Cashman taught him to reflect about the big ideas he wanted to convey before demanding perfection in minor work tasks. "Are you inspiring people rather than perspiring people?" Mr. Laudicina asked himself daily.

Heeding that reminder wasn't easy. Last year, the A.T. Kearney executive got highly involved in conference hotel arrangements for the firm's Global Business Policy Council, a think tank that he chairs. "Have you checked out the rooms?" Mr. Laudicina remembers asking council staffers. "Have you tested the menus?"

He says he stopped interfering after realizing that his bed linen queries wouldn't motivate his associates. "Having control over their areas of responsibility allows them to feel more empowered," Mr. Laudicina explains.

A trusted colleague can serve as an equally useful sounding board for a perfectionist executive. "Find someone who understands the value of perfectionism – but also how to manage it," recommends Judy Murrah, chief information officer of [Applied DNA Sciences Inc.](#), APDN +0.08% a biotechnology company in Stony Brook, N.Y.

The approach worked for her. An industrial engineer with a straight-A average in college, Ms. Murrah says she tried to do everything right on the job as well. But getting everything right wouldn't get her ahead – as she discovered in 2011 while an information-technology executive for [Motorola Solutions Inc.](#) MSI +0.28%

Leslie Jones, its chief information officer and her boss, encouraged Ms. Murrah to control this perfectionist practice. To gain a senior leadership position at Motorola Solutions, she had to "break free of the need to have every detail nailed down before acting." Ms. Jones recalls telling her lieutenant. "Good executives can make decisions on about 60% of the data." (Ms. Jones retired last year.)

Ms. Murrah concluded that making the right decision "was less important than the need for speed," she says. "That advice was one of those defining moments."

The Applied DNA executive believes she still has perfectionist tendencies which could crimp efficiency. But now, Ms. Murrah says, she feels more comfortable proposing a half-baked idea and attempts to avoid "obsessing over things which are not yet done."

Some executives take small steps to expand their tolerance of imperfection. They enforce a personal time limit on completing tasks or promptly accept responsibility for their mistakes. Others learn to trust their subordinates.

A slow retreat from perfectionism made a difference for the general counsel of a Boston biotech concern. Several years ago, she faced possible demotion due to her excessive perfectionism, according to Anne Stevens, her then coach. "She felt like she would make a mistake if she didn't do everything herself," and often stayed up half the night correcting staffers' draft presentations, recalls Ms. Stevens, managing partner of ClearRock Inc., an executive coaching and outplacement firm.

"The company felt she wasn't developing her team enough," because team members had lost enthusiasm for exerting their best efforts, Ms. Stevens continues. "She was pretty stressed out."

Ms. Stevens persuaded the executive to gradually enlarge her comfort zone. Among other things, the woman let a junior attorney choose the frequency of her update requests on a big assignment she gave him. The move quelled her anxiety over an imperfect outcome, and the project worked out well, Ms. Stevens reports. The general counsel kept her job.

Perfectionists can become better bosses if they stop assuming that "mine is the only solution or the best solution," observes psychiatrist David Sack. He has treated perfectionist executives hooked on alcohol or drugs. "Nobody wants to be commanded to do things your way," he says.

For entrepreneur Mike Wethington, sharing more power with his employees eased some of his perfectionism. The CEO of Outsell LLC, a digital marketing software concern in Minneapolis, says he used to exert extensive control because he feared failure. Mr. Cashman's coaching led him to recognize that "it's absolutely critical to be less of a perfectionist," he adds.

That's partly why Mr. Wethington recently joined colleagues in drafting a strategic presentation for a major automotive maker. The CEO figures he could have finished the presentation faster working alone. But "at the end of the day, it's a better product because of the collaboration of ideas."