

Lawyer Perfectionism Is A Disease We Can Control

By **Liam Montgomery** (June 1, 2021)

A disease besets the legal profession. Its symptoms are manifest and destructive: depression, anxiety, emptiness, exhaustion and job dissatisfaction.

It makes lawyers miserable, deters good people from entering our profession, and drives others to leave what could be a productive and fulfilling career. Like many problems endemic to our profession, it can disproportionately affect attorneys belonging to underrepresented groups and thereby make our profession less diverse and inclusive. At its worst, it can end lawyers' lives, through severe mental and physical health impacts and suicide.



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The disease? Perfectionism.

Although there is no cure for this disease, there are treatments. Here are four simple steps lawyers — new lawyers and lawyer leaders alike — can take to treat this deadly malady.

1. Give yourself and your teams permission to take risks and grow.

NBA legend Michael Jordan famously said:

I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

Perfectionism paralyzes us and drives us to avoid the calculated risks that separate good from great. So the first step in treating perfectionism is recognizing that there are no perfect people. Encouraging people to acknowledge their humanity and avoid perfectionism is actually a good thing that we should encourage, not fear.

Make no mistake about it, however: This is not a prescription for mediocrity.

The pursuit of excellence and the pursuit of perfection are very different things. The former should be every lawyer's endeavor. The latter leads to exhaustion and futility.

The fundamental misconception for lawyers is that to be excellent, one must be perfect. Not so.

Imagine a Michael Jordan who never even tried to take winning shots in regular season games, just so he could avoid missing them. Would he have made his most iconic playoff-winning shots?

Conversely, sometimes excellence does mean perfection. When I file a brief, I expect it to be absolutely typo-free and devoid of Bluebook errors. Those mistakes are rooted in inattention or haste, not in constructive risk-taking.

Constructive growth, on the other hand, is bigger and more important than that: It does not stem from sloppiness and lack of attention to detail. Instead, growth through constructive feedback helps us learn and feel comfortable taking risks.

Early in my career, I worked with some of the most gifted legal writers in the world. I was determined to find my own unique style and flair, just as I could see they had done. The drafts that I submitted took risks, through clever (at least in my mind) phrasing or playful analogies.

Most of the time these attempts did not survive the red pen, and I often felt discouraged. But I kept trying, and eventually my risk-taking started to pay off.

In one brief, I quoted a passage from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." The partner was hesitant, but he liked it, took a risk and let it stay. The judge loved it, specifically commenting on it during oral argument.

Those partner redlines were my missed buzzer-beaters. I would never have hit this winning shot without them. The partners I worked with taught me the difference between flair and bombast, but they never censured me when I fell on the wrong side of the line.

Only when lawyers on both sides of the equation — the lawyer and their leaders — give themselves this room to grow can they learn and advance.

2. Own your shortcomings.

When we fall short, we only learn by owning it and when our leaders hold us accountable. Holding someone accountable for a mistake does not require censuring them.

For the person making the mistake, it means recognizing the mistake and fessing up (more on this below). For the leader, it means listening, understanding why the issue occurred, and constructively teaching the lawyer how to avoid this type of problem in the future. In short, it involves a constructive, two-way dialogue that leads to a solution.

I used to fly Navy jets off aircraft carriers, in the dark, in bad weather, into and out of hostile countries. That is a horribly unforgiving business, where mistakes can be a matter of literal life and death.

But did we pursue or encourage perfectionism? Never. In fact, we purposefully induced new aviators into making constructive mistakes, we debriefed them with brutal honesty and we moved on.

Eventually those new aviators became the instructors. They developed the confidence to lead other aviators, to take constructive risks and to have confidence in themselves.

If Naval aviators don't preach perfectionism, lawyers certainly don't need to.

3. Bring leaders solutions, not problems.

Let's be honest about this, lawyers in leadership roles are usually incredibly busy and taxed. They are juggling client demands, their own work, firm management, family life and much more. Their time for lengthy heart-to-heart conversations with constructive feedback may be limited.

So when lawyers fall short on a calculated risk and own the issue, as mentioned in Steps 1 and 2 above, they must come to their leaders with more than just a problem — they must also bring solutions.

They may turn out to be the wrong solutions, but that is OK. These are just more opportunities for growth and learning.

But even if a proposed solution is not the right one, a thoughtful and constructive proposal starts a conversation from a positive place, inspires confidence that the lawyer recognized the issue and what could be done about it, and does not merely unload the issue from the junior lawyer onto the leader.

Don't simply unload a problem on your supervisor: Bring a solution with you to show how you learned and will grow from it.

4. Short-term learning can lead to long-term amnesia.

The immediate priority in dealing with problems or mistakes is implementing a solution. When the dust settles, however, it is imperative to debrief the situation, learn from it and move on. This should take two forms.

The first is introspective learning. Sit down and think carefully about what led to the issue.

Was it a calculated risk or was it sloppiness or rushing? Is it a risk you would take again with the benefit of hindsight or was it one you would avoid? What did you learn, and how will you avoid a similar situation in the future? How did you handle it when you owned it, proposed a solution and fixed it?

This learning also must involve a constructive debrief between leader and lawyer. Leaders must ask these same questions of their subordinate and demand frank answers.

Often, leaders can learn as much from helping a young lawyer as they learned from going through the process themselves. And critically, they can model for their lawyers what it means to be a constructive, not destructive, leader.

When this process is over, move on. Focusing on the past makes you risk-averse and fearful, exactly the opposite of growing and learning.

Take what you learned from the issue but do not cling to it. The only way to nail the next buzzer-beater is to be in the present moment, not thinking about the shots you missed.

Conclusion

Perfectionism is a siren that draws us into the shoals of unhappiness, fear and risk aversion. Four simple steps can give your teams room to grow and learn. This will not sacrifice the excellence you can and should demand. Quite the opposite: It will actually lead to that excellence.

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