

The Trap of Perfectionism

By Todd Alexander

I just read a review of new book about procrastination that sounded pretty interesting. I plan to read the book but I don't want to just run right out and get it. I'll wait until I talk to someone who's read it to see if it's as good as the review said it was. Then I'll have to finish the other books I'm currently reading.

Maybe someone I know has the book that I can borrow. If not, then I'll wait until a day I'm running errands takes me by the bookstore that I think will have it. And when I have a few days with some free time that I can devote to reading ... I'll read the book.

Sound familiar? Procrastination is something that plagues all of us from time to time. Many people don't realize that often procrastination is a manifestation of perfectionism and perfectionism is one of the biggest traps that keep us from accomplishing the things we want.

The problem with perfectionism is based upon two prevalent myths. The first myth is that there will come a perfect time to act and we should wait for it. It's true that some times are better than others but how often have we missed opportunities because we were waiting for the perfect time? How many times have you missed a great financial opportunity because you waited for the perfect time to buy, sell or re-finance?

The path out of this perfectionist trap is to turn your focus away from what's possible and take action on what you can do NOW. Perfectionists are often quite adept at rationalizing why they shouldn't take immediate action. What they don't often see is the downside of postponing action. For example, What assignments have you put off because you wanted more time "to do it right" only to find yourself cramming to get it done at the last minute? There's a lot of practical wisdom in Nike's "Just Do It!" slogan.

The second myth of perfectionism is the firmly held belief that there is a perfect answer or solution. This leads to endless amounts of data gathering, revisions and postponements. It's like trying to buy a computer. You spend hours researching equipment and vendors to identify the best product at the best price. On the day you're ready to make your purchase you read an article about a new breakthrough in technology that casts a giant shadow over the machine you planned to buy. At this point you're stuck. It's hard to feel good about moving ahead with your purchase but if you postpone the purchase you'll start the cycle all over again. Today's perfect decision will always be made imperfect by tomorrow's changes.

How many times have you missed the deadline on a project because you kept working it over in an attempt to make it perfect? On a weekly basis I see crisis created in organizations as a result of the misguided attempt to perfect something. We forget that opportunities are often windows that open and close without respect for our efforts. Sometimes we just need to act and as hard as it is for some of us to admit, there is a place for solutions that are less than perfect.

Perfectionism is often the enemy of action and it is action - not perfectionism- that will take us closer to our desired outcomes. What are some ways that you have seen yourself fall into the trap of perfectionism? What things have you postponed or passed on because you couldn't do it the way you wanted? Are there ways you have set perfectionist traps for others that have kept them from taking risks or acting independently?

Here are some guidelines for avoiding the traps of perfectionism.

1. At the outset of the process or project quickly determine the time and quality requirements. (Be sure to use the customer's criteria and not your own standard.)
2. Set a date for making a decision or completing the project and budget your time.
3. Focus on taking action and avoid postponing decisions.
4. When the perfectionist voices start shouting, go back and do 1,2 and 3.

I'm learning, both through my own experience and through observing others, that those who make consistent incremental progress are more productive than those who strive for perfection. The goal is to allow our perfectionist tendencies to influence our best efforts without keeping us from acting. I guess that means I should go and buy that book now.