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Coaching individuals with perfectionistic tendencies When high standards help and hinder

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Abstract

Perfectionism has been widely recognised in the clinical field but has received less attention in the coaching psychology literature. Referring to overly high and unforgiving personal standards of performance that are accompanied by harsh self-evaluation when self-imposed standards are not met, perfectionism has the potential to undermine the coachee's ability to achieve their goals as well as the coaching process itself. In consequence, it is important for practitioners to be able to identify and work effectively with those coachees whose perfectionistic tendencies represent an obstacle to progress. This paper discusses the current literature on perfectionism and provides recommendations on how to work effectively with coachees for whom unremittingly high personal standards are an impediment to personal growth and development.

Keywords: *Perfectionism; perfectionistic tendencies; self-evaluation; high personal standards; self-acceptance; context.*

The construct of perfectionism has long been recognised in the clinical literature and in personality theory. In recent years both the theories about, and research on, perfectionism have grown considerably (Sumi & Kanda, 2002) with an emerging literature examining the implications of perfectionism for well-being and functioning in both clinical (see Shafran & Mansell, 2001) and non-clinical populations (Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi & Nekole-Moghadam, 2011; Kearns, Forbes & Gardiner, 2007; Nekole-Moghadam, Beheshtifar & Mazrae-Sefidi, 2012). As there is growing recognition of the ways in which perfectionistic tendencies may impact on

an individual's performance, so perfectionism has started to become a focus of the coaching psychology research and literature (see, for example, Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010).

Perfectionism has been defined as the desire to achieve unremittingly high standards of performance in combination with excessively critical self-evaluations (Frost et al., 1990). Individuals who aim for perfection often define self-worth largely in terms of accomplishment, evaluating experiences according to often rigid and overly demanding performance criteria, productivity or success. For these individuals, any aspect of personal performance

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which is judged as falling short of these standards maybe evaluated as a failure (Pacht, 1984). Perhaps for these reasons the self-development author Anne Wilson Shaef (2013) has described perfectionism as, '...self-abuse of the highest order'.

As the evidence accumulates to suggest that this is a widely occurring phenomenon, it is reasonable to assume that perfectionism is likely to feature in the work with many coachees and may, in certain circumstances, warrant intervention in its own right. As such, those who deliver coaching interventions need to be well-equipped to identify variants of perfectionism that are likely to interfere with either coachees' ability to achieve desired outcomes, or with their ability to use coaching effectively as a vehicle for change and growth.

In this paper the case is made that coaching psychologists need to be aware of, and able to identify, manifestations of perfectionism that have the potential to hinder coachee goal-achievement, wellbeing and development. The literature on perfectionism and its relationship to wellbeing and functioning is reviewed. The difference between unrelenting standards that are likely to be detrimental to the individual, and the healthy pursuit of excellence, is considered. Guidance is offered on how to identify 'warning signs' of negative perfectionism in coachees. The paper concludes with some recommendations on appropriate interventions that can be usefully employed when it becomes evident that a coachee's level of perfectionism requires intervention in its own right.

Towards an understanding of perfectionism

Findings from the literature

Kearns, Forbes and Gardiner (2007) noted that one of the principle challenges of working with the construct of perfectionism is the lack of any universally agreed definition. In its broadest sense, perfectionism refers to excessively high personal standards of performance that are accompanied by critical self-evaluation when self-imposed standards are not achieved. However, beyond this broad conceptualisation, different authors have emphasised different aspects of what is perhaps best understood as a multifaceted construct. For example, perfectionism has been conceptualised as a personality trait (Besharat et al., 2010), and as a pattern of thinking and behaviour that is consistent over time (Anshel et al., 2009). Drawing on information-processing theory,

Corrie (2004) proposed that with the tendency to fuse self-worth with achievement, the phenomenon can be usefully understood as a particular cognitive stance towards the self and one's experience. Burns (1983) has also construed perfectionism in cognitive terms, describing it as a network of cognitions that comprises expectations and evaluations of self, others and events which are characterised by a rigid adherence to overly demanding standards and the tendency to view performance as the key-criteria for self-worth. More recently, Egan, Wade and Shafran (2010) have proposed that perfectionism can be understood as a transdiagnostic process that is implicated in the aetiology and maintenance of a broad range of psychopathologies.

Whilst these authors have tended to emphasise the unidimensional, self-oriented aspects of perfectionism, others have argued for a broader, multidimensional conceptualisation. Frost and associates (1990), for example, developed a multidimensional self-report perfectionism scale (the FMps) which draws upon a combination of theoretical constructs and self-report measures (see Egan, Wade & Shafran, 2010, for a review). Frost and associates (1990) proposed that the excessively high standards demonstrated by those with perfectionistic tendencies are typically accompanied by doubting one's actions and being unduly preoccupied with making mistakes. Additionally, they emphasise that these individuals are overly sensitive to parental expectations and criticism and tend to overvalue order and organisation. More specifically, the FMps is organised around the following dimensions:

- Concern over mistakes (comprising items such as, 'if I fail at work/school, I am a failure as a person');
- Doubts about actions (identified through statements such as, 'it takes me a long time to do something 'right'');
- personal standards (e.g. 'I set higher goals than most people');
- parental expectations (e.g. 'My parents wanted me to be the best at everything');
- parental criticism ('as a child, I was punished for doing things less than perfectly');
- organisation ('organisation is very important to me').

Hewitt and Flett (1991a) have also developed an elaborated conceptualisation of perfectionism,

arguing that in order to fully understand this construct, it must be conceptualised within the context in which it is expressed. Their multidimensional perfectionism scale (HMps) comprises three dimensions which emphasise the interpersonal situations in which perfectionistic standards are activated or enacted. The dimensions of their self-report inventory are:

- 1 self-oriented perfectionism: that is, the setting of unrealistic, exacting personal standards coupled with stringent self-evaluation of performance (for example, as expressed in the statement, 'I strive to be the best at everything I do');
- 2 other-oriented perfectionism: that is, setting unrealistic, exacting standards for others and evaluating them critically when they fail to achieve this (for example, 'if I ask someone to do something, I expect it to be done flawlessly');
- 3 socially-prescribed perfectionism: the perception that the individual is subject to the unrelenting standards of others (as expressed in statements such as, 'people expect nothing less than perfection from me').

As Egan et al. (2010) observe, the HMps and the FMps are the two principal measures of perfectionism that have been used to investigate perfectionism, at least in clinical populations, and although a review of the statistical properties of the measures is beyond the scope of this paper (see Flett et al., 1991, and Frost et al., 1993, respectively), there appears to be strong evidence for reliability as well as discriminant validity (see Enns & Cox, 2002). Whilst there is a degree of overlap between the measures, with socially prescribed perfectionism on the HMps correlating with the parental criticism and parental expectations subscales of the FMps (Frost et al., 1993), the dimensions do not overlap fully, suggesting that perfectionism encompasses more elements than either measure alone fully accounts for. These findings would appear to support the view that perfectionism is a multifaceted, complex construct.

Although there are differences in how perfectionism is understood, a number of common features can be identified that pave the way for thinking about how – and when – to address perfectionism in coaching. These would appear to include: (1) the over-evaluation of achievement and striving; (2) setting excessively high standards of performance and then rigidly adhering to these; (3) overly harsh

evaluations of one's own performance (including difficulties tolerating setback or failure) and (4) negative consequences for self and/or others when perfectionistic tendencies are manifest.

Taken as a whole, much of the literature would appear to point to perfectionism as exerting a negative influence on well-being, functioning and productivity, with a marked bias in the literature towards identifying its problematic nature. This is perhaps unsurprising given the research findings which highlight the negative consequences for perfectionistic individuals and those around them. Perfectionism has been shown to reduce personal productivity and life satisfaction, and to impair quality of interpersonal relationships (Burns, 1980; Hill, Zrull & Turlington, 1997). In the workplace, individuals with strong perfectionistic tendencies can prove difficult to line manage, challenging for colleagues to work with, and problematic for subordinates to work for (McMahon & Rosen, 2008).

Perfectionism has been implicated in elevated stress levels, impaired decisionmaking, inflexibility, reduced interpersonal sensitivity, procrastination and avoidance (see Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi & Nekole-Moghadam, 2011). As at least some of the characteristics (such as poor decisionmaking, limited interpersonal skills and resistance to change) have been consistently implicated in leadership derailment, it has been noted that perfectionism may contribute directly to maladaptive leadership behaviour (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010). For example, drawing on Hurley and Ryman (2003), Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi and Nekole-Moghadam (2011) observe that the manager with perfectionistic traits may be unaware of problematic behaviours and lack the self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity to appreciate that their attempts to be empowering can be experienced by others as over-controlling. Indeed, there is some evidence that managers who demonstrate high levels of perfectionism do not make good leaders (McMahon & Rosen, 2008).

In the clinical arena, perfectionism has been associated with numerous domains of emotional distress and difficulty including anxiety disorders (e.g. Frost & DiBartolo, 2002), trait anxiety (Juster et al., 1996), depression (Hewitt & Flett, 1991b; Kawamura et al., 2001), eating disorders (Moor et al., 2004); suicidality (Chang, 1998) and borderline personality disorder (Layden, Newman & Morse, 1993). The various 'domains' of perfectionism have also been

differentially implicated. For example, self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism appear to feature particularly strongly in depression and suicidality (Hewitt & Flett, 1991b; Ranieri et al., 1987).

In view of the apparently highly negative and potentially far-reaching consequences of perfectionism it is not surprising that perfectionism has become an increasing focus and target of intervention in personal development (Antony & Swinson, 1998; Egan, Wade & Shafran, 2010) and coaching (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010). Some have even concluded that any striving for perfection is by definition evidence of psychological difficulty (Blatt, 1995; Pacht, 1984). However, is this truly the case, and is it accurate to state that the legacy of perfectionism is inevitably one of distress or impaired functioning?

Unrelenting standards or striving for excellence

Differentiating helpful and unhelpful perfectionism

As noted by Antony and Swinson (1998), amongst others (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2010), perfectionism is not intrinsically detrimental. Indeed, as Ferguson and Rodway (1994) point out, many people adopt a perfectionistic approach in specific areas of their lives without ever developing impaired functioning or emotional distress. Corrie (2002) has also suggested that perfectionism may be a normative human experience rather than a limitation which must be overcome. This would appear to be supported by an emerging literature which highlights the potentially positive consequences of perfectionism. For example, Nekole-Moghadam, Beheshtifar and Mazraesefidi (2012) found a positive correlation between perfectionism and creativity. Other studies have found perfectionism to be associated with higher academic achievement, higher levels of motivation to achieve, and use of adaptive coping strategies (Ram, 2005). Additionally, higher scores on the dimensions of personal standards and organisation on the FMPs have also been associated with an increased sense of personal efficacy and high self-esteem (Frost et al., 1993; Minarek & Ahrens, 1996).

Taken as a whole it would, therefore, appear that whilst perfectionism may indeed be associated with problems in the workplace, self-handicapping behaviours and negative effects on well-being it can, in other circumstances, benefit the individual. Attempting to understand how perfectionism can, in

certain circumstances, contribute to positive outcomes has led researchers to attempt to differentiate positive and negative sub-types.

Burns (1980) has proposed that in order to understand the effects of perfectionism on well-being and performance, it is necessary to differentiate adaptive and maladaptive subtypes. This echoes the previous work of Hamachek (1978) who distinguished helpful and unhelpful variations of perfectionism according to the degree of flexibility with which personal standards are established. For Hamachek, when striving for excellence is accompanied by sufficient flexibility to allow for human frailties and personal limitation, perfectionism can be adaptive. This 'normal' or healthy version of perfectionism is characteristic of those who:

'...derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits' (Hamachek, 1978, p.27).

In contrast, unhelpful or negative perfectionism is characterised by the rigid, unrelenting application of excessively high standards in which minor 'infringements' or flaws in performance cannot be tolerated:

'Here we have the sort of people whose efforts... even their best ones... never seem quite good enough, at least in their own eyes. It always seems to these persons that they could... and should... do better... they are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes, they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling' (1978, p.27).

This early attempt to differentiate adaptive and maladaptive subtypes goes some way to helping coaching psychologists better understand when and why perfectionism becomes problematic. As Adkins and Parker (1996) suggest, adaptive perfectionism can be seen as an active approach to the world. The desire for success reflects an assumption that high standards are achievable due to underlying beliefs about the self as capable and worthy. In contrast, maladaptive perfectionism (what Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi & Nekole-Moghadam (2011) refer to as 'the dark side' of perfectionism) reflects a passive

approach in which the need for success reflects a preoccupation with avoiding failure due to beliefs about the self as inadequate and unworthy.

In behavioural terms, the difference between positive and negative variations of perfectionism can be understood in light of patterns of positive and negative reinforcement. Positive perfectionism is constructed as the harnessing of one's resources to achieve a goal that results in a favourable outcome. The behaviour is associated with specific emotions as a function of positive reinforcement. In contrast, pursuit of the same goals in order to avoid perceived negative consequences would be associated with emotional responses as a function of negative reinforcement. Interpreted in this light, striving for excellence is only likely to become an obstacle to goal attainment and emotional well-being when expectations of the self are inflexible and based on a sense of personal inadequacy. A similar position is adopted by Hewitt and Flett (1993) who, drawing on their multidimensional conceptualisation of perfectionism, propose that situational stressors are likely to trigger difficulties for perfectionistic individuals only if they pose a threat to some core aspect of the self. As self-oriented perfectionism prioritises the attainment of personal standards, any stressor which disrupts the achievement of those standards is likely to pose a threat to the central aspect of the self, thus representing a vulnerability factor. Thus, self-oriented perfectionism may only become problematic when associated with situational triggers or interpersonal contexts that undermine sense of personal identity, efficacy or self-esteem. In contrast, healthy perfectionism is evident in those who work conscientiously towards a desired result but who are able to tolerate setbacks and failures when they occur. This so-called 'positive perfectionism' has been associated with higher levels of advancement, self-esteem and self-actualisation whilst negative perfectionism has been associated with low self-esteem, depression and irrational beliefs (Niknam, Hosseinian & Yazdi, 2010).

In summary, as observed by Silverman (1999), perfectionism has potentially positive and negative consequences depending on how it is channelled. Where it represents the harnessing of focus, motivation and effort in order to pursue a goal that enables the pursuit of a positive outcome, perfectionism represents the healthy pursuit of excellence that enables individuals to achieve. In the context of coaching, this form of perfectionism could be

seen as a valuable resource at the client's disposal for pursuing meaningful goals. However, where excessively high standards are pursued in an attempt to avoid negative consequences perfectionism tends to be negative in orientation and may require further exploration to understand its potential problematic implications for the client, their goals, and the coaching contract. As a potential obstacle to the effective delivery of coaching, it is intervening in this latter form of perfectionism to which we now turn our attention.

Working with perfectionism in coaching psychology practice Tailoring interventions to specific presentations

When working with a coachee who displays signs of perfectionism, a central task is one of helping coachees understand the difference between positive and negative manifestations, as a precursor to modifying unhelpful aspects, whilst at the same time developing new standards and behavioural repertoires that support the healthy pursuit of excellence. How might coaches and coaching psychologists best approach this task?

Based on a review of the literature, there are four specific ways in which perfectionism might present itself in coaching, each of which is likely to require a different response. These are:

- 1 the coachee's perfectionism is a problem in its own right and, therefore, modification of perfectionistic standards needs to be an explicit focus of the coaching contract.
- 2 the coachee's perfectionism is implicated in other areas for which the client is seeking coaching;
- 3 the perfectionism represents a vulnerability factor that could undermine future development, representing a psychological 'achilles heel' for the coachee;
- 4 the coachee's perfectionism is impacting, or has the potential to impact on, the coaching itself.

These will now be briefly considered.

1 The coachee's perfectionism is a problem in its own right and, therefore, modification of perfectionistic standards needs to be an explicit focus of the coaching contract

Although the coachee may not have sought, or been referred for, coaching due to identification of perfectionism, it becomes clear that the client has

excessively high and rigid personal standards, coupled with a tendency towards harsh self-evaluation, particularly in the face of setback or failure. These factors, in the coaching psychologist's opinion, are directly undermining the coachee's ability to achieve agreed goals. Other manifestations of this might include the coachee's obvious avoidance of new challenges for fear of making mistakes or a rigid perspective on criteria for success that prevents flexibility and innovation. In coaching terms. This could be considered a 'BiG' (Behaviour incompatible with Goals) problem (see Dunkley & Palmer, 2011) and the approach to the intervention here is likely to draw heavily on modifying unhelpful networks of cognitions (including enduring cognitions such as underlying assumptions and beliefs) as well as encouraging experimenting with new behavioural repertoires to observe outcomes relative to desired goals.

2 The coachee's perfectionism is implicated in other areas for which the coachee is seeking coaching

Although the coachee may not have sought, or been referred for, coaching due to the identification of perfectionistic tendencies (by self or others), it becomes apparent following assessment that perfectionism has a role to play in preventing lack of success in defined areas. For example, consistent failure to deliver results through others as a function of interpersonal difficulties with subordinates might reflect the influence of other-oriented perfectionism that is impeding the effective management of others. This might necessitate the use of interventions that focus on enhancing self-awareness, gaining information on the coachee's external image and possibly social skills training to enhance effective communication skills.

3 The perfectionism represents a vulnerability factor that could undermine future development, representing a psychological 'Achilles heel' for the coachee

Here, the coachee's perfectionism represents a risk factor for reduced well-being and performance in work or in life and may even render the individual vulnerable to psychopathology when particular levels and types of challenge are encountered (such as when a situational stressor disrupts the achievement of the personal standard thus representing a threat to some central aspect of the self). This may require more in-depth work on enhancing

self-esteem, decoupling self-worth and achievement, and helping the coachee recognise this as an area of vulnerability to which they might always need to remain alert, especially during times of increased personal or professional strain. When working with this category of perfectionism, the coach or coaching psychologist may also need to hold in mind the interface between coaching and psychotherapy and consider a referral to a therapist should the coachee's level of need transcend the terms of the coaching contract.

4 The coachee's perfectionism is impacting, or has the potential to impact, on the coaching intervention itself

In practice, the modification of perfectionistic mindsets and behaviours is not always easy to achieve. As Nekole-Moghadam, Beheshtifar and Mazrae-sefidi (2012) observe in the context of perfectionism at work:

'the paradox that perfectionism helps performance in some ways and hurts performance in other often makes it difficult for the perfectionist to change.... Because some aspects of perfectionism help the executive perform, there is often a feeling that any change will lead to less success.' (p.4661)

Examples of this behavioural expression of perfectionism might include a coachee's reluctance to experiment with more flexible standards whilst recognising that, at some level, their perfectionism is self-handicapping. Coaches may also experience frustration at their coachees' apparent resistance to change, creating the potential for ruptures in the coaching relationship. Equally, ruptures in the coaching alliance due to excessively high expectations of the coach (as in other-oriented perfectionism), inability to follow through on coaching assignments due to a fear of making mistakes or a rigid attachment to existing behavioural routines that prevent a willingness to experiment with alternative behaviours in the service of the goals specified in the coaching contract need to be monitored. Close monitoring of the coaching process for early signs of tension in the working relationship is therefore indicated, with particular attention to interpersonal processes that appear to parallel areas of development for which coaching has been

sought. Thus, motivational issues are likely to feature in working with perfectionism, with ambivalence about the potential consequences of change (Egan, et al., 2013). In consequence, identifying and working effectively with this manifestation may require of the coach a particularly well-honed ability for empathy and tact, as well as a genuinely curious approach to helping the coachee assess the parameters and implications of retaining negative perfectionism in both the short and longer-term.

Working with perfectionism in coaching

Identifying specific cognitive profiles

Holding in mind the four potential manifestations of perfectionism outlined above can assist both coach and coachee in deciding the extent to which perfectionism may need to be a focus of the coaching contract, and prompt a more focused search for relevant examples of positive and negative perfectionism manifesting in the coachee's life. However, a second framework that can inform coaching and coaching psychology practice is information-processing theory and in particular, cognitive behavioural models of coaching (see Williams, Edgerton & Palmer, 2010).

A number of cognitive biases have been identified in perfectionism. In his early work, for example, Ellis (1962) identified perfectionism as reflecting the belief that there is a correct response to every situation and that it is awful if this solution is not found. The influence of this type of dichotomous (or 'all-or-nothing') thinking was also identified by Beck (1976) who, in his early work in the clinical arena, emphasised the tendency of depressed people to judge outcomes as either perfect or catastrophic. Burns (1980) similarly proposed that perfectionism reflects a distinct form of dichotomous thinking, whereby performance and self-worth are judged solely in terms of perfection or worthlessness.

Since then, theorists have identified as inherent to a perfectionistic cognitive style a wide range of perceptual and interpretive biases. These include the tendency to overgeneralise perceived performance failures (Hewitt & Flett, 1993) magnify negative aspects of performance, selectively attend to perceived personal flaws and discount positive information (Ferguson & Rodway, 1994), as well as engage in rumination over mistakes and per-

sonal limitations (Frost et al., 1997; Guidano & Liotti, 1983). These types of information-processing are often either readily identifiable or implicit in the person's selftold story, providing numerous opportunities for exploring further the network of expectations and evaluations through which perfectionism may be expressed. Historical and current examples of standard setting, criteria for success and failure, responses to errors (by self and others) as well as responses to success (minimised or over-inflated) are all fruitful avenues of enquiry to help establish whether negative perfectionism is a significant feature of the client's needs. Use of decision-making and problem-solving tools such as a cost-benefit analysis of personal standards can also help coachees review candidly what has been gained and lost by excessively high standards and elicit or 'flush out' unarticulated beliefs about the benefits of unhelpful levels of perfectionism. Equally, broadening the coachee's scope for self-evaluation so that the self and standards for success can be seen with a broader, more nuanced life plan is also helpful.

Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi and Nekole-Moghadam (2011) have proposed 10 action steps which they suggest can be used to modify the negative aspects of perfectionism and lead to enhanced productivity. These range from increasing insight, to setting SMART goals, experimenting with standards of success and confronting the fear of failure whilst at the same time celebrating successes and being willing to learn from mistakes. As Beheshtifar, Mazrae-Sefidi and Nekole-Moghadam (2011) also observe, 'one of the hidden hazards of perfectionism is the tucking away of and attempts to avoid many things that make individuals feel less than perfect' (p.171). In the spirit of addressing this 'hazard', it is important to consider ways in which the individual might, in selected areas, aim for a 'good enough' outcome and evaluate the implications of so doing (see Burns, 1980, for an accessible approach to considering the potential benefits of lowering personal standards).

A further area of intervention that is likely to be of particular benefit in working with coachees who are perfectionistic is self-acceptance. Palmer and Cooper (2013) provide examples of self-acceptance beliefs, 'I'm OK, just because I exist' and 'I can accept myself, warts and all, with a strong preference to improve myself, even though realistically I don't have to' (p.85). A fuller review of the literature

on self-acceptance is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for further information see Palmer (1997), Wilding & Palmer (2010), and Palmer & Williams (2012) elevating work on self-acceptance to the core of the coaching contract – particularly with coachees who experience high levels of self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as it may offer some important benefits. For example, self-acceptance helps coachees modify the tendency to evaluate themselves in global terms (successful, failure, strong, weak, etc.) and support the development of a more realistic and adaptive self-appraisal.

Working on self-acceptance also supports the coachee in decoupling sense of self and value as a human being from achievement or productivity; the notion that they may be inherently valuable for being human (with all the challenges, limitations and frailties that come from being human) may be a challenging concept for such coachees to accept. There may also be useful avenues to explore combining this work on self-acceptance with the emerging literature on self-compassion and its role in promoting well-being and personal effectiveness (see Gilbert, 2005, for a useful review of this literature and Neff, 2011, for an accessible resource for coaches and their coachees). Compassion focused coaching does focus on issues relating to self-esteem and self-acceptance (Palmer, 2009).

One final point recommendation is to be wary of viewing perfectionism itself in ‘all-or-nothing’ terms, as either healthy or unhealthy. This is likely to prove overly simplistic when perfectionism is viewed through a more multidimensional ‘lens’ and the many contexts in which high standards of performance are actually expected are considered. It may be the case that a behavioural expression of perfectionism can be judged as positive or negative solely as a function of its context. For example, if working in an organisation that is perfectionistic in its expectations or organisational culture and where attention to detail is critical, the capacity to retain strict and exceptionally high standards may be highly beneficial. However, in an organisation where team functioning is highly valued, a newly-appointed executive with the same capacity for attention to detail whilst operating according to stringent criteria for success may lack interpersonal sensitivity and awareness, proving detrimental to the individual and the productivity of the team.

Any intervention for perfectionism should, then, be grounded within a thorough formulation (Corrie & Lane, 2010) of the areas or dimensions of perfectionism that need to be addressed. In addition, it should also take account of those aspects of a coachee’s perfectionism that contribute to enhanced performance, an understanding of the point at which the striving for excellence becomes detrimental to the client or others, and environmental contingencies that help promote the emergence in an individual of one form of perfectionism over another at a specific point in time.

In light of these factors, and in the current absence of models that have been developed specifically for the coaching context, we would encourage readers to consider how it is possible to integrate current research findings on perfectionism with specific models of coaching that can be tailored to individual contexts. To facilitate effective coaching psychology practice with perfectionism, table 1 (overleaf) can be used as a heuristic framework for guiding decision-making with coachees about their strengths and needs:

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the current thinking about the construct of perfectionism, offered a broad framework for helping coaching psychologists differentiate negative manifestations from the healthy pursuit of excellence, and provided some guidelines on how to help coachees modify unrelenting high standards. In reviewing the existing literature, it is clear that perfectionism is not inevitably an obstacle to achievement and well-being. Nonetheless, where it is present, coaches and coaching psychologists need to be equipped to assess the parameters and manifestations of the coachee’s personal standards and, where necessary, to be able to devise specific interventions to address this.

Perfectionism is best understood as a complex, multifaceted construct. It takes time to determine whether, where and how perfectionism is a destructive force in a coachee’s life and for this reason we would encourage a multi-modal approach to assessment, as well as a creative approach to designing interventions that are likely to enhance collaboration in an area of change that the coachee may not find appealing or easy to address.

Table 1: Framework for exploring positive and negative perfectionism with coachees.

1 Current manifestations of perfectionism**1a. Personal standards**

- What are the coachee's personal criteria for success and failure?
- What beliefs does the coachee have about how success is achieved?
- To what extent are the coachee's sense of self-worth and self-esteem dependent upon success, productivity or accomplishment?
- To what factors does the coachee tend to attribute failures?
- How does the coachee respond to challenges, setbacks or perceived 'failures'? To what extent can these be embraced as opportunities to learn? To what extent does the coachee respond with feelings of shame?
- Is the coachee able to relax personal standards and take a more flexible approach, when to do so would result in a better outcome?
- What standards does the coachee expect of others?
- What standards does the coachee believe that others hold for them? To what extent do they regard themselves as equipped to meet these standards?
- Based on how the coachee narrates their circumstances, needs and goals, is there evidence of a rigidity of thinking style that might imply dichotomous ('all-or-nothing') thinking or other cognitive biases in the coachee's perception or interpretation of events?
- Is there evidence of the coachee being able to change perspective when it is advantageous, or evidence implies the need, to do so? Or is there evidence of the coachee adhering to a perspective that is counter-productive to the coachee's individual needs and goals, or the needs or goals of their organisation?

1b. Behavioural repertoires

- To what extent does the coachee have well-elaborated problem-solving and decision-making skills? Is there evidence of the coachee being able to apply these to everyday challenges in life and at work?
- Does the coachee have effective coping and self-soothing skills for managing the personal impact of challenges, frustrations and disappointments?
- What self-handicapping behaviours does the coachee engage in? Is there evidence of procrastination or avoidance?
- What forms of avoidance might the coachee tend to use (including quite subtle forms that are worth probing carefully for)? When and why are these used?
- More specifically in relation to the needs of the coachee and the aims of coaching, is there evidence that the coachee's performance does not match the client's potential (i.e. they are under-performing)?
- To what extent is the client able to be creative, innovative and engage in appropriate spontaneity – in life and at work?

2 Situational factors

- What situational factors or events tend to precipitate the coachee's self-handicapping behaviours?
- What is the culture of the organisation in which the coachee works, and the culture of any other systems in which the coachee lives and works? To what extent are these systems 'perfectionistic'?
- How does the coachee's organisation and people of relevance to the coachee (for example, line manager, directors, etc.) respond to errors?
- To what extent does the coachee's organisation encourage creativity and 'taking the initiative' amongst its employees? To what extent is taking the initiative punished?

- To what extent are the coachee's own perfectionistic tendencies (both positive and negative) impacted by the culture of the organisation in which they work? (Areas to explore here might usefully include a consideration of what is reinforced and punished in this setting and how the coachee's behaviour is shaped accordingly.)
- 3 Factors from the coachee's history that may be relevant to explore further**
- How were standards set within the coachee's family of origin?
 - How did the coachee react to early disappointments, frustrations or setbacks?
 - How did the coachee's care-givers respond to early successes and failures?
 - What values were imparted to the coachee, during their formative years, concerning success, accomplishment, productivity and failure?
 - What values were imparted to the coachee, during their formative years that might have shaped criteria for self-worth?
 - What were the coachee's childhood and adolescent attitudes to academic studies and scholastic achievements?
 - What expectations did the coachee have of relationships with parents, teachers, siblings and peers? How might these expectations relate to other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism?
- 4 Implications for coaching contract**
- What are the coachee's personal goals for coaching? For their career? For their life? To what extent are these realistic?
 - What would the coachee see as a 'good enough' outcome for coaching?
 - How might specific perfectionistic themes manifest in the coaching, either in relation to specific coaching assignments, or the coachee's ability to engage in the process?
 - What implications might the different dimensions of perfectionism have for the coaching process (for example, a desire to please their coach; hyper-sensitivity to perceived disapproval of their coach; self-handicapping behaviours such as concealing information)?

That perfectionism can be positive or negative in its consequences we would see as a helpful starting point for exploration. However, this is a perspective that raises further questions. For example, to what extent can positive and negative forms of perfectionism be understood in isolation from the context in which they are expressed? Might it be the case that a particular mind set or behavioural repertoire that is wholly unhelpful in one context might be highly adaptive in another? If this is the case, working effectively with coachees may entail helping them establish context-dependent criteria for determining when excessively high standards are performance enhancing and when they are not.

A second area for both research and practice to investigate more systematically are those variables and experiences that foster the development of positive rather than negative perfectionism. Is this, for example, best understood as a personality trait that is present early in life or one that emerges as a function of life experiences and patterns of rein-

forcement and punishment? Additionally, are positive and negative perfectionism best understood as qualitatively distinct or merely different points along the same continuum? Is it possible for an individual to have the personality trait of positive perfectionism but for life experiences to transform this into negative perfectionism (and vice versa)? If so, what are some of the critical factors that mediate this process? Equally, is negative perfectionism best understood as a pattern of thinking and behaviour that can ultimately be eradicated? Or is it best understood as a stable trait that, through a variety of coaching interventions, can be modified but which represents a psychological 'achilles heel' that will need on-going monitoring?

These are questions for the future and to which we hope the discipline of coaching psychology will respond. However, in reflecting on our own experience of working with coachees for whom perfectionism is an issue, it would certainly seem that the pursuit of positive change is best approached

through avoiding any tendency to see perfectionism in dichotomous terms. Positive and negative manifestations do not come neatly packaged. Rather they need to be uncovered, often through a process of sifting through multiple examples of personal standard setting, and the setting of standards for others, and through adopting a multimodal approach to assessment that can help the coachee consider what a more adaptive approach might look like in different domains. For many coachées, it is only by taking the time to articulate and evaluate the feared consequences of experimenting with new ways of thinking and acting that a journey of change can begin. Thanks to International Coaching Psychology Review, 9, 1 the editorial team for permission to the DJCP to bring this article in our journal.

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