



Perfect Strategy for Dealing with Perfectionists **In This Less-than-Perfect World**

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Perfectionists may mean well, but they can drive you crazy if you give them half a chance.

People who are always trying to "be perfect" insist that everyone meet their standards of exactness and precision. And—they cannot tolerate anything less.

In many cases, we share with them the same goals and high standards. Our frustration comes when we try in vain to please them or to seek recognition for our efforts.

Solution: A little understanding and planning can help you get along with any perfectionist.

THE PERFECTIONIST TRAP

"Be-perfects" attempt to control every aspect of their world—including the people around them. Their desire for control is driven by the belief that only their standards and approaches to problems produce the best results.

Be-perfects' controlling behavior originates in their belief that others do not have their discipline or high standards. By relentlessly monitoring and needling people, be-perfects believe they can force others to conform to their way of doing things.

Parents may also foster this be-perfect mentality by placing older-child standards on younger children, expecting the younger children to follow them.

Be-perfects also feel there is only one way—their way. People who don't agree must be pushed aside before they upset the system that the be-perfect has put in place.

Be perfects dread the consequences of failure, of letting themselves and others down. They desperately need others to produce flawless results that will relieve these fears.



DEALING WITH BE-PERFECTS

Most people give their love, friendship and support when they feel the other person is making the same emotional investment.

But be-perfects make it clear from the start that their respect must be earned by our willingness to perform at their exacting level.

That's why we constantly feel inferior and rebuffed by be-perfects. Be-perfects don't let us off the hook because they won't let themselves off the hook.

Confrontation is counterproductive. If you lash out at a be-perfect's impossible demands or his/her hostility over sub-perfect performance, you'll compound his anxiety and worsen the situation.

Rationally trying to show a perfectionist why his standards are impossible is also a poor strategy. Prove to a perfectionist that his demands are bizarre and excessive, and you'll only get lots more turmoil. You cannot argue with anxiety, which is why it often makes sense not to engage the person in a heated discussion.

HOW TO HANDLE A BE-PERFECT

The way to coexist with a be-perfect without losing your cool or your mind is to adopt a proactive strategy. The goal is to satisfy the person while keeping your self-respect intact.

You can do this using a technique I call "contracting". Before a smart contractor begins a construction job, he talks with the client. He wants to understand *in advance* what the client expects and what the client considers important.

In the case of dealing with a be-perfect, imagine you are the contractor and the be-perfect is the client. Your job is to establish what is expected of you and his standards—and to discuss them until they are clear to all concerned.

For contracting to work, it must be done in advance. Let the be-perfect know you respect his need to have things come out right. Make it clear that you're showing your respect by making sure you have the resources to meet his standards in the time and space allotted. You should also make it clear that the outcome may be different from what was expected.



Steps to take when "contracting" with a be-perfect...

- **Establish what is most important.** If a be-perfect's demands seem excessive, use curiosity and concern to discover the person's critical issues.

Example:

An office mate repeatedly fumes at you for messing up the workspace you share. Discussion reveals that he would be satisfied if your papers were stacked neatly and debris off the floor.

- **Ask for feedback.** Never presume you know what the be-perfect wants. Run your understanding past him.
- **Make fallback plans.** If things don't go as scheduled, agree on what changes should be made.
- **Reassess and report.** If unexpected difficulties will make the outcome less than "perfect", discuss them as soon as they arise and make adjustments.

Important:

Maintaining communication will eliminate surprises. For a perfectionist, a surprise is likely to feel like a catastrophe.

- **Put it in writing.** A memo of agreement will prevent conflict later. Explain that this isn't an adversarial position, but a way to reduce the stress that comes from misunderstandings and disappointed expectations.

REDUCING BLOWUPS FURTHER

In an ongoing relationship—with a boss, a family member, etc.—make the occasional lapse a learning experience rather than an emotional ordeal.

If your performance falls short, inquire in detail about just how it differed from expectations and what would have made it satisfactory.

Don't let defensiveness, anger or resentment keep you from asking the most important question—What should we have talked about, and when, to prevent this problem?

THE POWER OF PRAISE

Don't expect praise from perfectionists. Your A+ performance is nothing special, since it merely meets their everyday standards. That's why be-perfects are notably stingy with approval.



Perfectionists also rarely get much gratitude and appreciation from others. A little affirmation and acknowledgment of a perfectionist's performance goes a long way.

Don't hold back if you feel you can sincerely praise the perfectionist's efforts. He will bloom like a desert flower.

If not, resume contracting and recognize that the be-perfect's standards can never be fully met. Remind yourself that you and the be-perfect have the same goals and that your way of reaching those goals is just as important. It's just different.