

What's Wrong with Perfect? In Today's Changing Environment, A Lot

By [LawVision](#) on June 2, 2016

Perfectionism is a tendency with which many of us have an intimate familiarity. In our personal lives, we acknowledge that demanding perfection from those around us, such as our spouses or children, is detrimental and can harm our relationships. In ourselves, we tolerate perfectionism as part of who we are, sometimes embracing it and other times reflecting (or needing to be reminded) that "to err is human." Yet perfectionism in our professional lives, particularly in our approach to deliverables, is often regarded as an acceptable norm. As an extension of that, perfectionism embedded in a firm's culture is routinely lauded, held in esteem and regularly reinforced.

Research by academics associated with Human Synergetics International (HSI), however, shows that perfectionism in firm culture or leadership has a host of negative consequences. Not only can perfectionism create an unwelcoming and aggressive environment in which to work, it can also present a powerful deterrent against innovation and change. Leadership styles that promote perfectionism encourage others to work long hours, feel that they have to prove themselves and view their efforts as deficient unless the outcome is perfect. Cultures guided by a perfectionist tendency (and based on our initial use of cultural assessment with law firms, there are more than a few) are described by HSI as follows:

"A Perfectionistic culture characterizes organizations in which perfectionism, persistence, and hard work are valued. Members feel they must avoid all mistakes, keep track of everything, and work long hours to attain narrowly-defined objectives. While some amount of this orientation might be useful, too much emphasis on perfectionism can lead members to lose sight of the goal, get lost in details, and develop symptoms of strain."

Perfectionism in law firms, by this definition, could be one of the biggest contributing factors to many of the challenges we face today. Consider the associated characteristics:

1. [Slow adoption of technology](#) and efficiencies
2. A reluctance to innovate and change
3. High levels of anxiety, stress and depression
4. An inability to retain women and diverse attorneys
5. Struggles to attract and keep Millennials

These last two are particularly notable. Last week, my colleague [Geoff Schuler wrote](#) of his experiences as a Millennial in a professional services organization. Several of the points he makes, including his passion for working in a team-oriented environment that cultivates learning and the value he places on efficiency and stress management, exemplify the types of values that contrast directly with an overly perfectionist organization. Perfectionist leaders and cultures place the onus on individuals, not teams, to perform. Similarly, they undermine a person's feelings and focus instead on the accomplishment of tasks, adding to stress and showing a lack of consideration for its effects.

In a [November 2015 article](#) in Harvard Business Review, authors Lindsay McGregor and Neel Doshi modernized research done in the 1980s by professors Edward Deci and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester to isolate six main reasons

people work: play, purpose, potential, emotional pressure, economic pressure and inertia. The first three of these tend to boost performance, while the latter can be detrimental. Perfectionist leaders and cultures typically place the burden of emotional pressure on employees. In these environments, disappointment arising out of an inherently human quality – making a mistake – is intense. Research shows emotional pressure as a motivating factor yields poorer outcomes and, by extension, lower employee – and customer – satisfaction. Not coincidentally, both of these outcomes are persistent, and growing, challenges for law firms.

[“Manage Your Emotional Culture,”](#) published in the Jan/Feb 2016 issue of Harvard Business Review, highlights yet another dimension of the cultural influence: the emotional side. Researchers and authors Sigal Barsade and Olivia A. O’Neill find after more than a decade of study that “emotional culture influences employee satisfaction, burnout, teamwork and even hard measures such as financial performance and absenteeism.” Perfection-driven cultures leave little room for emotions.

The Antidote to Perfect

Active cultural management is an essential element of law firm management for the future. As organizations with vast numbers of leaders and managers contributing to the employee experience, law firms are especially vulnerable to the impacts of negative cultural attributes. Perfectionist tendencies at the top will inevitably trickle down, creating a ripple effect that increases tension for Associates and staff even when the partner ranks are spared. To combat the challenges we face as an industry may demand a deeper look at who we are as firms, professionals and leaders.

Stay tuned...LawVision’s Law Firm Culture Matters study, an in-depth analysis of law firm culture across 30 leading law firms, is underway. Our goal is to determine the prevalent cultural norms in the legal industry and how they contribute to positive – and negative – outcomes for today’s firms. If you are interested in being a participant in this research, please contact me directly or Silvia Coulter at scoulter@lawvisiongroup.com.