

# Perfectionism vs. The Pursuit of Excellence



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*Achievement oriented people want to achieve excellence because they enjoy challenging tasks...the Perfectionist wants to be seen by others as perfect.*

These two concepts—the pursuit of excellence and perfectionism are often confused by many people in business, sports and most other occupations—but they are in fact, miles apart.

Human Synergetics *Life Styles Inventory*<sup>™</sup> (LSI) measures both—Perfectionism is measured under 10 o'clock style, called Perfectionistic. The pursuit of excellence is measured under the Achievement Style (11 o'clock).

Achievement is linked to success, personal accomplishment, happiness and even good health—Perfectionism is not.

Many people confuse these two ideas, because both groups look like they are pursuing excellence. The difference between the two lies with the thinking *behind* the behaviour. Achievement oriented people want to achieve excellence because they **enjoy challenging tasks** and prefer to set for themselves goals that are challenging, but attainable. In contrast, the Perfectionist wants to be seen by others as perfect. Their sense of self-worth is tied up with attaining flawless results. They have an extreme **fear of**

**failure** and are very hard on themselves when they inevitably fall short of perfect results.

The book *Perfectionism: A Sure Cure for Happiness*, by J. Clayton Lafferty, PhD. And Lorraine F. Lafferty, Ph.D., *Human Synergetics Publishing, 1996*, describes the difference this way:

“The perfectionist sets impossible goals, while the achiever sets sights on realistic and achievable standards. And although both are driven, the perfectionist has a nervous quality, stemming from an abject fear of failure, with the desire for success tied to self-worth. The achievement-oriented individual, on the other hand, seeks excitement, is invigorated by the fun and challenge of the task, and the opportunity to learn from failures when they occur.”

In LSI terms, Perfectionists often use phrases such as “*tries to be best at things*”, “*seeks recognition*”, “*self-centered*” and “*impatient with own errors*”. While Achievers use terms such as, “*sets own goals*”, “*enjoys a challenge*”, “*shares responsibility well*”, and “*learns from mistakes.*”

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This is not just a matter of semantics. Whatever way you look at it, Perfectionism is an **undesirable way of thinking**.

From a results point of view—ironic as it may seem—Achievers usually attain much better results with less effort than do Perfectionists. In the pursuit of Excellence, Achievers set challenging, yet attainable goals, while Perfectionists set “pie-in-the-sky”, often unattainable goals. The difference is that when Achievers reach their goals, they immediately set new ones. The Japanese called this concept *Kaisan* or constant change and eventually leads to improvements that surpass even the Perfectionists’ lofty goals—Giving up perfectionistic behaviour will actually improve your ability to accomplish things.

But it is not the ultimate results that should be concerning Perfectionists—they should be **more concerned** with the inevitable, negative side-effects of this way of thinking. Perfectionists simply are not as healthy as Achievers—both physiological and psychological. The book, Perfectionism: A Sure Cure for Happiness lists a host of problems that Perfectionists can look forward to.

The LSI Self-Development Guide lists a number of suggestions to help people become less Perfectionistic and more

Achievement oriented. One suggestion involves an **attitudinal shift**. Perfectionists need to understand that their work is **not** their worth. Their feelings of self-worth are not exclusively tied to how hard one works or how effective one is. Rather, they should learn to please themselves first and focus on what is important to them.

Another suggestion that is more behavioural is to regularly practice good goal-setting—continually set challenging, yet **achievable** goals and when reached, set new ones that are again, challenging and attainable.

Perfectionism and the pursuit of excellence seem like similar terms. But in fact, they are very different. One stems from a belief that mistakes are a sign of weakness, affecting one’s self-worth and is linked to over-work, under-achievement and poor health. The other comes from a desire to engage in challenging projects that provide a great deal of enjoyment and is linked to success and good health.

*To learn more about these two subjects, complete an LSI Self Inventory, and review the accompanying Self-Development Guide. The book, Perfectionism: A Sure Cure for Happiness can be purchased by calling Human Synergetics Canada. (519) 284 4135.*