

Perfectionist leaders can push their teams to meet high standards—but it can backfire and stifle creativity

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Have you ever kept a brilliant idea to yourself, fearing your boss's reaction? This hesitation is more common than you might think, especially when working under perfectionist leaders.

Some of the most famous business leaders of the past century were renowned for their perfectionism—but also didn't shy away from showing anger.

The co-founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, led groundbreaking innovation at the tech giant, but was infamously prone to becoming [bad tempered](#) at times.

Another was Roone Arledge, president of the US news organization, ABC News, from the late 1970s to the 1990s. He had a profound impact on news and sports programming, and was [described](#) by former Disney Chief Executive Robert Iger as both inspiring and demanding. At times, he tore apart projects and had his team rework them through the night.

As a leadership trait, perfectionism can drive teams to meet high standards. Our [research](#) has explored an important catch, though. Perfectionist leaders, especially when displaying anger, can undermine [creativity](#) and innovation.

What is perfectionism?

Perfectionism is a personality trait characterized by demands for flawless performance. It's a common trait across many different kinds of workplaces.

Perfectionism can be self-oriented, where leaders hold themselves to extremely high or impossible standards.

It can also be other-oriented, where they expect the same from those they lead.

It's easy to see why so many leaders gravitate toward perfectionism. It can [inspire employees](#) to produce high-quality work, minimize mistakes

and strive for success.

Perfectionist leaders can also [increase](#) followers' engagement with their work and their motivation to learn.

But the trait can also mean setting unrealistically high standards for oneself and others, with little room for error or flexibility.

Creativity matters, too

Meeting high standards isn't the only thing that matters at work. Creativity—the ability to generate novel and useful ideas—is also critical for organizational success.

Creativity thrives in environments where employees feel psychologically safe, empowered to take risks and make mistakes.

This is where perfectionism falls short. Whether intentional or not, perfectionist leaders often foster fear—both of making mistakes and falling short.

Our research

To explore how leader perfectionism affects creativity, we conducted [three studies](#) across different cultural contexts.

The first involved 200 participants from the US who recalled their experiences of perfectionist leaders showing anger.

The second was a controlled lab experiment with 119 participants in the Philippines.

For the third, we surveyed 296 employees and 61 leaders at a Chinese telecommunications company.

The results were consistent across all three. Leaders who were very perfectionist—especially when they expressed anger—made employees feel less safe, which lowered creativity.

Why does this happen?

Think of creativity as a flame. Perfectionism acts like a strong wind, intended to fan it but often blowing it out instead.

When employees feel constant pressure to meet leaders' perfectionist standards, they stop thinking outside the box.

Instead of embracing bold, creative ideas, they stick to what's safe. That often means avoiding risk at all costs and focusing on flawless work.

This phenomenon is all about [psychological safety](#), the belief that it's safe to try new things in the workplace.

Our [research](#) found the more a leader set perfectionist standards and shows anger, the less likely their employees were to take risks and come up with ideas.

Lessons for leaders

Setting high standards is valuable, but it's equally important to foster an environment where employees feel safe to innovate.

This environment can only exist when leaders temper their [perfectionism](#) with empathy and understanding. This doesn't necessarily mean lowering

standards—just balancing high expectations with support and compassion.

Organizations can offer [training programs](#) to help leaders develop their skills in expressing appropriate emotions—both when setting work standards or when employees fail to meet their expectations.

For example, [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) has been shown to be an [effective strategy](#) for helping perfectionists regulate their tendency to be overly critical.

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