

ACE WOMEN'S Network™ Michigan

Mentoring Mondays
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“In order to rise, you have to lay your burden down.” Are you always fearful that something is going to go wrong? Then you may be caught in the “perfection trap.” In *“How Women Rise”* by Sally Helgensen and Marshall Goldsmith, the authors call our attention to this habit which could be disastrous to your career.

Habit 7: The Perfection Trap

“Striving to be perfect may have helped get you where you are, but it will get in your way as you aspire to higher levels. There are many reasons this is so:

- **Striving to be perfect** *creates stress* – for you and for those around you;
- **Striving to be perfect** *keeps you riveted on details*, distracting you from the big picture;
- **Striving to be perfect** *creates a negative mind-set* in which you’re bothered by every little thing that goes wrong;
- **Striving to be perfect** *sets you up for disappointment* for the simple reason that it’s unrealistic.

The authors believe that women are especially vulnerable to the perfection trap. “While women in general tend to be seen as better leaders than men, they are often undermined by their tendency to give themselves a hard time, a habit rooted in the desire to be perfect. The result is that even high-achieving women tend to take failures deeply to heart, get tangled up in self-blame, and stew over mistakes instead of moving on.”

You may ask, why women? The research suggests two reasons: gender expectations from early childhood and how those expectations are reinforced in the workplace. Girls are usually viewed as obedient daughters and excellent students. Boys, on the other hand, are given more latitude – the naughty little boy – good at sports – bending the rules to score points, etc. “Such expectations can prompt girls to seek approval by striving to get everything right. . . . As athletes, boys are expected to be aggressive, show confidence, stand out from the pack, and be bold. . . . What’s the greatest praise an athlete can receive? That he *dominated*. . . .”

Take the case of Vera, a high performer with a global insurance company. “She is an intellectual powerhouse, extraordinarily hard working, and superbly organized; speaks five languages and is an outstanding public speaker.” Vera was being considered for the CEO position of her company but this is what her colleagues had to say about her: “Vera is an amazing performer and unsparing in her dedication. But she tends to ask too much of people. She’s so worried about failure that she ends up micromanaging her team . . . she’s always nervous that something will go wrong. Vera was by-passed for the CEO position.”

Vera’s quest for perfection derailed her chance to rise. Here are some reasons:

- Perfectionism made her reluctant to take risks. If you’re trying to be perfect, every task or encounter feels high stakes.
- The desire for perfection kept her focused on control of every situation.
- Instead of delegating to highly talented and capable employees, she often ended up doing the task herself – leaving no time to look at the big picture.

“Some degree of risk-taking is essential if the organization is to evolve and grow. . . . For that, you need a healthy ability to trust, willingness to take considered risks, and a big vision of what the organization could become. It comes down to confidence.”

“If you have perfectionist tendencies, you can best serve your long-term interests by learning to delegate, prioritize, and get comfortable taking measured risks. . . . The good news is that you will be the primary beneficiary if you lay your burden down.”

To secure your copy of *“How Women Rise”* visit www.hatchettbooks.com.