

Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Author believes the quest for perfection is akin to addiction

By Susan Jacobs

While meticulous attention to detail is considered a hallmark of a good meeting planner, author Jane Bluestein warns event professionals not to confuse the healthy pursuit of excellence with perfectionism, which she believes is akin to addiction.

In her newest book, *The Perfection Deception: Why Trying to Be Perfect Is Sabotaging Your Relationships, Making You Sick and Holding Your Happiness Hostage*, Bluestein makes the case that perfectionism has toxic effects on our thinking, relationships, work and sense of worth, and is a contributing factor in depression, insomnia, anorexia and suicide. She believes that perfectionism is as dangerous and destructive as any addictive substance.

She points out that while dedication to doing one's best is admirable, maintaining a facade of perfection is stressful, exhausting and unhealthy. "Whether perfectionism is motivated by a need for other people's approval, ego identification with some socially engineered fad or as a matter of conditioning, the outcomes will invariably show up in a variety of problems based in chronic disappointment—with ourselves and others," she writes.

How Planners Fall Prey to Perfectionism

As an author of 19 books who frequently speaks to groups around the world, Bluestein has worked with event planners for three decades. She notes that event planning requires incredible communication and organization skills, good boundaries, patience, flexibility and a bit of ESP. "While I wouldn't generalize that everyone in the field is a perfectionist, I do think that people who deal with a lot of details, timing and personalities can easily fall into the trap," she says.

Bluestein has some advice for planners who wonder whether they are perfectionists. "The acid test for me is: What is your sense of worth at the end of an event—whether it went flawlessly, totally tanked or was somewhere in between? Do you feel less valuable or capable if an event does not go perfectly? Likewise, you can do everything right and still have a client who will find something to complain about. Does that make you feel like a failure?" Bluestein asks.

For her newest book, Bluestein interviewed psychologists, experts and self-defined perfectionists, and reflected upon her own personal experiences. She found that perfectionists tend toward all-or-nothing thinking. They equate one tiny mistake with total failure, and have difficulty recognizing the difference between making a mistake and being one.

She urges planners to view events as learning experiences. Seeing the

disappointment and frustration in event professionals who just couldn't get all of the equipment to work right makes Bluestein wish they would be less critical of themselves. "We can inspire confidence in our clients, and still be honest," she adds.

How Perfectionism Impacts Relationships

Perfectionists tend to be unforgiving of themselves...and others. "When we bring perfectionism to a relationship, we bring along a set of expectations and standards that can create stress and alienation," Bluestein says. She points out that when one's sense of worth depends on being right, it comes at the expense and dignity of someone else who must be proven wrong—causing anger, impatience, frustration, disappointment and even contempt.

In the workplace, she says perfectionism creates disharmony and can manifest in such behaviors as individuals berating co-workers for arriving late, bringing the wrong equipment or making minor mistakes.

The Roots of Perfectionism

A former educator and counselor, Bluestein now runs Instructional Support Services, Inc., a consulting and resource firm in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She has several theories as to what drives people to perfectionism.

"The idea of needing to be or appear perfect is almost always linked to a fear of failure, rejection, intimacy, abandonment or risk to our job, financial security or social status," she says.

She believes one's early upbringing has an influence. "I found evidence of a biological, inborn personality trait that makes some of us more hard-wired for perfectionistic tendencies. However, each of the resources I examined also acknowledged the impact of environment and experiences," Bluestein says. She notes that youngsters who don't get their basic needs met overcompensate by striving to be perfect.

Bluestein also maintains that the media plays a role. "While the media doesn't cause perfectionism,

the images and values that confront us, especially in advertising, encourage the pursuit of unrealistic ideals. We worry that we are inadequate if we are not a certain size, earn a certain income, don't drive a certain car or wear a certain brand," she says.

Is There a Cure for Perfectionism?

Rather than a cure (which she views as an all-or-nothing approach to addressing the problem), Bluestein believes perfectionists must learn to recognize their inclinations and take measures so the problem does not dominate their lives. In this way, she views perfectionism akin to an addiction that can't be "cured," but can be diligently managed. Like other addictions, she believes recovery is possible with self-awareness and support.

