

BREAKING BAD: celebrated behaviours that erode wellbeing and engagement

It was mid-2007 and I had been cranking out 70 hr weeks over the last year, with 10 hrs on top for my Ph.D. My COO pulled me aside one day and said: "Mark, when you send me emails at 3 am in the morning, that's weird!" He, together with another Director coached me on how to succeed whilst getting my life back. I was lucky, someone I respected noticed and took the time to address the matter in a sincere and forthright manner. Many are not so fortunate and toxic work behaviours unwittingly abound.



If we want sustainable organisations that promote well-being and engagement then two behaviours are especially toxic, perfectionism and workaholism. What!! Aren't these the highly-sought after, even idolised corporate paragons we recruit for? The answer is "No", as they erode your institutions in subtle but alarming ways. Conversely, it's not about creating a clock watching, anything goes culture that you are after. Fundamental to progress is hard work and high standards. But momentum is also crucial to success and these toxic behaviours undermine sustainable organisational momentum.

Workaholism is probably the best dressed social addiction that people proudly admit to. The irony is that it's undeniably harmful, and often [co-exists together with perfectionism](#), which can propel people into burnout. Certain professions promote or incentivize their staff to work excessive hours for extended periods of time (e.g. management consultants, billable hour industries like law and accounting). Overlaid with a "face-time mentality," and the [myth of the 10000 hrs](#) it's easy to see how this workaholism behaviour flourishes. [Numerous](#) studies have found that overwork and resultant stress can lead to all sorts of health problems, including impaired sleep, depression, heavy drinking, diabetes, impaired memory, and heart disease.

Recently I have noticed that in response to the threat to job security due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is an over-compensation in hours worked by some people to ensure they are deemed good citizens. Given the duration of the pandemic, this "sprint-athon" mentality will probably lead to higher levels of burnout. This is further compounded by the fact that peoples work and home space have merged, obliterating the last vestiges of boundaries between the two. In the U.S.A., homebound employees are logging [three hours more per day](#) on the

job than before lockdown, according to data from NordVPN, which tracks when users connect and disconnect from its service. In France, Spain, and the U.K. they found the day has stretched an additional two hours. Add that up over a week and that's more than an extra days-worth of work!!

So let's explore what I mean by each of these toxic behaviours and how to remedy them if you are a leader, team member or you see these behaviours in yourself. The SCARF neuroscience model developed by Dr David Rock is a useful lens through which to understand the impact of these toxic behaviours. These five broad factors cause either a reward or threat state in our brains, they are:

- **Status:** Feeling important and valued, respected, learning and developing.
- **Certainty:** Knowing what is going to happen and when, clarity about responsibilities, clear short-term goals.
- **Autonomy:** Perception of having control over events or environment, influence on decisions (even small ones), not feeling micro-managed, feeling your voice will be heard.
- **Relatedness:** Feeling connected to other people, feeling part of an in-group, feeling safe with others, a sense of belonging.
- **Fairness:** Perceiving exchanges to be fair and transparent.

WORKAHOLIC BEHAVIOUR

How to identify workaholism

Defn: Workaholism is working beyond what is reasonably expected of a worker (as established by the requirements of the job or basic economic needs) despite the potential for negative consequences (e.g. health, marital issues).

Complete the [Bergen Workaholism Assessment](#) :

Scoring: Always = 4, Often = 3, Sometimes = 2, Rarely = 1, Never = 0

1. You think of how you can free more time to work.
2. You spend much more time working than initially intended.
3. You work in order to reduce feelings of guilt, anxiety, helplessness and depression.
4. You have been told by others to cut down on work without listening to them.
5. You become stressed if you are prohibited from working.
6. You de-prioritise hobbies, leisure activities and exercise because of your work.
7. You work so much that it has influenced your health negatively.

Scoring "Often" or "Always" on at least four of the seven questions suggests you may have a workaholism problem.



Impact of workaholism?

a) Individual: Workaholism activates a threat response in their co-workers (non-workaholics) brain as a result of diminished: Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

[A comprehensive meta-analysis](#) found workaholism was related to lower job, family and life satisfaction, as well as worse physical and mental health. In addition, they experience greater levels of mental distress, and are [two to three times](#) more likely to experience depression or anxiety. Workaholism is related to other negative outcomes such as burnout, and a higher propensity for maladaptive perfectionism.

b) Team: Workaholics impact the team by setting unrealistic expectations around time at work, and ultimately the value of work-life balance. Because the workaholic is more prone to [mental distress and burnout](#), ultimately team members will have to pick up the pieces when the workaholic can no longer work. There is also a contagion effect, where workaholics with anxiety can pass their anxiety onto others.

c) Organisationally: Ironically workaholics do not differ on [performance appraisal ratings](#) relative to non-workaholics, despite their longer hours that they work. In a [2016 study](#) researchers found workaholism was linked to higher systolic blood pressure and greater levels of mental distress one year later. Results also show that workaholism is related to other outcomes such as burnout. These ultimately will all impact absenteeism, presenteeism and productivity. And it doesn't just impact the workaholic and the organisation, [Robinson and Kelley](#) found that children of workaholics fathers reported greater depression and external locus of control relative to children of non-workaholics fathers.

How to manage workaholic behaviour

- Ensure the individual does NOT work more than [55 hrs per week](#) on average. Have a regular rotation roster of people whom work overtime, not the same person i.e. workaholic.
- Get the workaholic to make public commitments (to the team) regarding non-work activities that are not negotiable e.g. be part of a mixed action cricket team on Wednesday nights.
- Discuss progress on regular weekly deposits into each of the 4 key components of their lives (physical, mental, socio-emotional and spiritual).
- Recognise people that lead more integrated lives. Evaluate people on the quality of their work outcomes (where the real value lies), not just the inputs (which can be face-time based).
- Be realistic in performance contracting, limit people to 3 key initiatives that are stretch but achievable. Be careful of the: "Do more with less" mantra.

The next toxic behaviour seems at first to run counter to our obsession with excellence. Whilst I certainly want my neurosurgeon to be exceptional in their attention to detail as they delicately cut into my brain, do I need them to deliver this precision in all tasks, that are not central to surgery. In the start-up and tech world you will often hear: "Fail fast, fail forward." Extreme perfectionists struggle in these contexts, but their numbers are on the [rise](#).

PERFECTIONISTIC BEHAVIOUR

How identify extreme perfectionism

Defn: Perfectionism is a set of self-defeating thought patterns that push the person to try and achieve unattainable goals. Striving for high standards and excellence is to be lauded. Extreme perfectionism however leaves a person perpetually dissatisfied as result of unattainable standards/goals. There are three types of perfectionism:



1. Self-oriented perfectionism: Those who attach irrational importance to being perfect, hold unrealistic expectations of themselves, and are highly critical of themselves.
2. Socially prescribed perfectionism: Those who believe their social circle is excessively demanding, that others judge them harshly, and that they must display perfection to secure approval and avoid rejection
3. Other-oriented perfectionism: Those who impose unrealistic standards on people around them and evaluate others critically.

These types of perfectionism tend to be interrelated. That said, individuals will tend to have higher levels of one type, depending largely on where their self-worth is obtained. Self-oriented perfectionists get their self-worth from achievement—especially relative to others. Socially prescribed perfectionists obtain their self-worth when others approve of or accept them. Other-oriented perfectionists feel a sense of self-worth when others respect and admire them.

Extreme perfectionists often reveal one (or more) of these seven behaviours:

1. They set extreme and *impossibly high expectations* for themselves;
2. They are *highly critical*, especially of themselves.
3. They often are very *defensive* and believe that most (if not all) forms of feedback are critical.
4. They are often *workaholics* and cannot accept less than *perfect* results.
5. A perfectionist's intense fear of failure *overrides the belief in an ability to succeed*.

6. They often will *agonize* over past experiences of failure or unfulfilled expectations.
7. They often have *difficulty managing stresses* related to their excessively great expectations.

Impact of perfectionistic behaviours?

a) Individual: This toxic behaviour activates a threat response in the recipient's brain as a result of diminished: Status, Autonomy and Fairness. Perfectionists set impossibly high expectations for themselves. Often, they are very defensive and believe that most (if not all) forms of feedback are critical. Perfectionism and workaholicism co-habit and nudge people into burnout. They often have difficulty managing stresses related to their excessively great expectations.

b) Team and Organisational: A specific subset of perfectionism, [other-oriented perfectionism](#), relates to imposing unrealistic standards of perfection on others, which can negatively impact the team.

An [extreme perfectionist's](#) intense fear of failure overrides the belief in an ability to succeed. They avoid situations where perfection is not possible, and this results in chronic procrastination. Perfectionists often hide or fail to disclose situations where they have been imperfect, concealing errors that may not be discovered until it is too late to fix them.

How to moderate extreme perfectionism

- Focus on their inter-personal needs, which are the precursors of perfectionism: [being accepted and cared for](#).
 - Discuss deep seated fears.
 - List pros and cons of perfectionism.
- Choose areas to be average, small experiments.
- Identify what went well (balanced perspective).
- Set deadlines to prevent procrastination.
- Savour the moment using [mindfulness](#). (See next section).
- Practice [self-compassion](#). (See section thereafter).

Mindfulness micro-moments using STOP

Mindfulness can be a simple but effective way to decrease the levels of stress and anxiety associated with perfectionism. The STOP acronym outlines a brief but memorable method for bringing the mind-body back into balance. In doing so the perfectionist increases their self-awareness (the gateway to self-management) and enhances their ability to interact more appropriately with others. This is important for perfectionists that often are hyper-focused on

what is wrong and consequently have poorer relationships with others. It involves the following steps:

S= STOP: periodically during the day just call a quick timeout. (5 mins in total).

T= Take 4 deep breaths in, each 4 seconds in duration. In between, hold your breath for 4 seconds, then exhale for 4 seconds, then hold breath for 4 seconds...This is called [box breathing and is used by Navy Seals.](#)

O=Observe: Engage your 5 senses in a sequential order, starting with your sense of hearing, then touch, taste, smell and finally sight. Observe what you are doing at that moment, and think about how it makes you feel, as well as how it might make others feel. Is there anything you would like to change? It can be either small or big depending upon the circumstances and impacts your behaviour, mindset or how you feel about the situation in general.

P=Proceed with what you were doing, but with your new awareness. This basic act of reflection is called metacognitive awareness. It can lead to positive and permanent changes in your thinking patterns and physical responses. You can use it in the midst of a stressful meeting, or you can put a daily reminder in your diary to make it a habit. This is especially valuable for perfectionists as these habits are so ingrained that it requires vigilance and repetition to undo this patterning.

Practice self-compassion through self-forgiveness

Step 1: In order to increase your ability to be compassionate towards yourself, you need to recognize what this behaviour involves. Answer the following questions in your journal. Use a mind-mapping technique with the word self-forgiveness in the centre of the page, and the answers to the questions below can be the branches.

- What do you mean by "self-forgiveness"?
- Have you ever forgiven yourself before? How did it feel?
- What beliefs block your ability to forgive yourself? What would be necessary to change these beliefs?
- What new behaviours do you need to develop in order to increase your ability to forgive yourself?
- What role does the existence of spirituality play in your ability to forgive yourself? The lack of it?
- For what do you need to forgive yourself?

Step 2: Now that you have a better picture of what is involved in self-forgiveness, you are ready to work on a specific past failure, mistake, error or misdeed.

- List a failure, mistake, error, misdeed, or event for which you are unable to forgive yourself.

- What feelings come to mind as you recall this past hurt?
- How would you describe your role in this past event? In what ways were you the victim, perpetrator, enabler, martyr, bystander, instigator, target, scapegoat, distracter, peacemaker, people pleaser or rescuer?
- Why do you feel strongly over what happened and how you treated yourself or others?
- What was the outcome of this event to your self-esteem and self-worth?
- Who was responsible for your reaction, your feelings and inability to forgive yourself?
- How can you put this incident behind you?
- How can you avoid being so hurt when something like this happens again?

Step 3: Once you have thought through how to forgive yourself for this past mistake, failure, error or event, create your self-forgiveness script. For the next 3 months let go of your self-anger, self-blaming, self-hatred, self-disgust, and self-pity over this specific past event by spending time in repeating this script. (PS it typically takes between [66 and 254 days](#) to inculcate a new habit depending on its complexity).

Step 4: Once you have forgiven yourself fully over the past incident, repeat step 3 addressing one at a time all the past or present incidents of hurting yourself or others for which you need to forgive yourself.

Step 5: When you have exhausted your list of incidents for which you need self-forgiveness, you will be on the road to compassion. If you have problems in the future, return to step 1 and begin again.

In conclusion, these surreptitious toxic behaviours are so deeply encoded into our very being and societal expectations, that we need to be ever vigilant. As you experience your first wins, take time to internalize these new ways of operating. Not just the feeling of success, but the process you went through to get there. Remember to....

