YOU NEED TO ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE
(Try letting the sunshine in)

There’s an old song that starts:
“You’ve got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative…”

Perfectionists sing a different tune:
“You’ve got to accentuate the negative, eliminate the positive…”

We’re talking about the thought process of filtering. Think of it as mental GoreTex®. GoreTex® is a remarkable material that allows air to pass through but blocks water. In our case instead of air, negative feedback and criticism permeate the layer. And, instead of water being blocked, it’s the compliments and feelings of accomplishment that don’t make it through. Staying dry: that’s good. Staying oblivious to all forms of positive reinforcement: that’s bad. It contributes to that sense of never being good enough. And as if hearing only the negative from others isn’t enough, we do the same thing to ourselves.

Let’s say Terry is giving Chris (a perfectionist) feedback on a presentation. Terry may say something like “That was a great presentation. You made your point well. The only thing that might have made it even more effective is maintaining better eye contact and more variation in vocal tone. The client and I are delighted with the results.” In other words, Terry is complimenting Chris and adding some constructive feedback to enhance Chris’ presentation skills. Chris, however, is likely to hear: “Your eye contact and vocal tone are bad.” That translates into the presentation was inadequate at best or a failure at worst. That interpretation is very different from the message communicated by Terry.

What happens if Terry delivers only the positive part of the original message? “That was a great presentation. You made your point well. The client and I are delighted with the results.” What will Chris be thinking? “Terry is trying to make me feel good about the meeting but I know it didn’t go well.” Quite a difference. And that’s the point. Given totally positive input, Chris (or most any perfectionist) is likely to discount whatever the speaker says, assuming it’s not the truth or that the person doesn’t understand how easy it was (I did well because it was an inherently interesting topic; anyone would have done well). I had a client who received the best grade in a tough class. She felt almost guilty about it. Surely she was given that grade because the teacher liked her and was going easy on her. It couldn’t possibly be because she had done well.

The problem with filtering is that it keeps the individual feeling inadequate/incompetent. There’s no way to change the sense of being “less than” when only negative comments are absorbed. To minimize filtering, the perfectionist needs to open him/herself up to hearing and experiencing positive input. Below is an exercise designed to improve acceptance of encouraging feedback.

EXERCISE: ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

1. When someone says something encouraging or complimentary, say “Thank you.”
   - Stop yourself from explaining why it was not such a big deal
   - Stop yourself from assuring the individual that s/he is mistaken

2. To help the process, devise some way to snap yourself into just accepting what is said. For example, press your thumb and forefinger together tightly or gently bite your tongue (literally).

(408) 733-3555
Francine@practicalperfectionist.com
3. When your inner voice starts telling you why to ignore the good things that have just been said, drown it out by telling yourself that you deserved the positive feedback.
   - List all the reasons why the speaker is right
   - Reinforce that by telling yourself what a good job you did

4. Notice your energy and emotions when you accept the positive
   - Keep a notebook nearby so at least twice per day you can jot down notes on your energy and emotions when you do that

5. When you get caught in the trap of filtering out good news, DO NOT CRITICIZE YOURSELF FOR ABSORBING ONLY THE NEGATIVE.
   - It’s okay. Everyone reverts to his/her habitual ways
   - Jot down notes on the effect that has on your energy and emotions

6. If you have a close friend or significant other, you may want to ask that person to support you in this endeavor. Ask that person to stop you from rejecting a compliment or kudos for a job well done.
   - Make it clear how you want to be made aware. Do you want the person to correct you? Do you want the person to give you a sign, such as snapping fingers or saying a code word?
   - Be open to taking the assistance. If you find yourself getting angry with the other person who is trying to help, it’s a sign you’re not willing to hear what s/he has to say. Tell the other person you’re having trouble processing the information and request him/her to stop.

I’d appreciate your feedback on how well this works for you. If you find creative ways to reduce/eliminate filtering, have some “aha” experiences when you review your notes on energy and emotions, or develop tools to allow someone to help you- I’d love to hear it.

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ABOUT FRANCINE GORDON:

Francine is an executive coach who focuses on helping people leverage perfectionism to enhance their effectiveness and satisfaction. She also supports managers and executives who are working through transition (e.g., promotion, integration into a new company, new assignment) and has a special interest in working with women executives.

Immediately after earning her Ph.D. from Yale University, Francine joined the faculty of Stanford GSB as Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior. Since leaving academia, she’s held a variety of positions including Director of Marketing at Pacific Bell, General Manager of California Actors Theatre (professional repertory company), Director of Human Resources at UB Networks (a subsidiary of Tandem Computers), and Manager in the Organization Practice Group at Boston Consulting Group. She is a certified integral coach (and a recovering perfectionist).

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(408) 733-3555
Francine@practicalperfectionist.com