Achievement, Worth, and the Need to Prove · About 4 minutes

When the Finish Line Keeps Moving

Recognizing when another improvement stops serving the task

The report is finished. You change the heading. Then you reach for the layout, and a finished afternoon starts to disappear.

High standards can serve good work. They become harder to live with when completing a task immediately creates a new requirement. The finish line moves because reaching it has not settled the question of whether you are good enough.

Victor, in this fictional example, is preparing a committee update. Members need current repair costs, clear options and a decision they can make. He checks the figures and sends a draft to the coordinator. She says it gives them what they need. He spends the evening redesigning it anyway, worried that a plain version will make him look careless.

There may be a genuine improvement to make. Clear headings can help readers. Accurate figures matter. A confusing option needs explaining. The question is whether Victor can identify a purpose for the next change beyond preventing anyone from judging him.

Shafran, Cooper and Fairburn describe a model of clinical perfectionism in which self-evaluation depends heavily on demanding standards, with success sometimes followed by raising them.[1] That is not a diagnosis of every conscientious worker. It offers a way to examine what happens just as a task could end.

Victor may need to correct an error. He may decide a small edit is worthwhile. He may also conclude that the draft is usable and feel uncomfortable sending it. Discomfort does not establish inadequacy. Relief after another check does not establish that an important error was prevented.

Define completion in terms of the work

“The costs are accurate, the options are understandable and the committee can decide” gives Victor a finish line he can assess. “Nobody could find fault” asks for something the report cannot deliver.

Necessary safety checks and professional standards still matter. The point is to identify them, not discard them in the name of being less perfectionistic. For a consequential task, responsible completion may require a second person's review or a formal checking process. Those requirements differ from an endless attempt to secure admiration.

Other commitments belong in the decision, too. Victor promised his partner a shared evening. Repeatedly extending optional work can have costs elsewhere, even when each extra revision seems small. His partner does not get to set every standard, but their agreement deserves consideration.

The report is finished long before Victor feels finished proving himself.

At some point you have to see how it feels to let the report leave your hands. You can care about what you made and go home.

Companion reading · The Life You Keep Trying to Deserve

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Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Achievement, Worth, and the Need to Prove (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Shafran, R., Cooper, Z., & Fairburn, C. G. (2002). Clinical perfectionism: A cognitive-behavioural analysis. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 40(7), 773–791. Source.

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