Who Set the Bar

Perfectionism, and the two things it puts in the wrong place

One question before you fill anything in, and there is nowhere to write the answer. Think of the last thing you went back and redid. Who would have noticed if you had stopped one version earlier?

Most advice treats perfectionism as a standards problem: your standards are too high, so lower them. That runs into two things. High standards on their own predict very little trouble; it is the fear of falling short that does the damage. And a standard is hard to lower when you never felt you were the one who set it.

Perfectionism usually puts two things in the wrong place. The first is the bar: what would count as good enough, and the work to get there. That is yours, and yet the standard part tends to feel like someone else set it. The second is the verdict: how the thing landed, and what people made of it. That is mostly not yours, and yet it tends to feel like it is all yours to carry. So you get no say in where the bar sits, and all of the blame for not clearing it. This sheet does not ask you to want less. It asks you to put those two things back where they belong.

Name one

One thing from the last month. Not the biggest one; one you can still picture. A piece of work, a message you rewrote, a meal, a conversation you prepared for.

The thing.

An example

Say the thing was a report you rewrote four times.

The bar: how many passes it gets, what counts as finished, the writing itself.
The verdict: whether your manager was having a good day when they opened it.

Before you sort it

If that thing had landed badly, how much of it would have been yours?

Rate 1 to 10. 1 = none of it was mine. 10 = all of it was mine.

Educational content; not a substitute for therapy. If you are working through something significant, consider connecting with a counsellor or your family doctor.

Two columns

Break that thing into its parts, and put every part in one of these two. Write quickly; the first sort is usually the honest one.

The bar what you decided and what you did: the standard, the effort, when you stopped	**The verdict** what happened after: how it landed, who said what, the timing, the luck

Read them back

In the verdict column, put a check beside every part you have been treating as your fault.

In the bar column, put a check beside every part you actually chose.

The checks on the right are weight you have been carrying that was never yours to lift, so put it down. The parts on the left with no check are decisions that were yours all along, and you have not been making them, so take them back. Those two moves together, the verdict down and the bar back, are what this sheet is for.

Where the bar came from

Who set this standard, and when did you agree to it?

It might have been you. It might be someone whose voice you can still hear. Either answer is worth having.

Write it yourself

If nothing says what finished looks like, there is no point at which you are done.

For that same thing, name the standard.

Not "do it well". Something you could check: how long it gets, how many passes, what has to be true before it is finished.

How will you know it is finished?

Write the signal you will accept, not the feeling you are waiting for.

One thing this week

One piece of work, done to the standard you just wrote, and stopped there.

When.

What I expect will happen.

The same question, now that you have sorted it. If that thing had landed badly, how much of it would have been yours?

Rate 1 to 10. 1 = none of it was mine. 10 = all of it was mine.

If the second number is lower, that is the sort doing its work. If it did not move, that is worth taking to someone. A number that will not move is usually held in place by something that started long before this piece of work.

Before you put this down.

Without looking back: name the two columns, and say which one you had been taking the blame for.

You do not have to want less for this to get easier. You have to be the one who decides what good enough is, because a standard you set is one you can actually finish.

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