

Are You a Perfectionist?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Hosts

CrisMarie Campbell and Susan Clarke

Are You a Perfectionist?

Susan: Welcome to *The Beauty of Conflict*, a podcast about how to deal with conflict at work, at home and everywhere else in your life. I am Susan.

CrisMarie: And I'm CrisMarie.

Susan: We run a company called Thrive Inc, and we specialize in conflict resolution, stress management coaching and building strong, thriving teams and relationships both in person and virtually.

CrisMarie: On this podcast we'll be sharing tips, tools about how to make your team, your relationship and even you work more effectively. You can find us at thriveinc.com, that's www.t.h.r.i.v.e.i.n.c.com or follow us on LinkedIn at Thrive Inc. We hope you enjoy this episode.

Susan: Today I want to ask you this question. Are you a perfectionist and do you think that's good or bad? We thought that this would be an interesting conversation to have because I happen to be sitting next to someone who's had a little perfectionism in their life. And I happen to be similar. And maybe I would love to be a perfectionist but I'm not, never have been very good at it, so very different perspectives.

CrisMarie: Sometimes people think perfectionism is a good thing. And I have learned the cost of perfectionism and how it is quite painful. And I can just use my rowing, for those of you that don't know. I was a rower at the University of Washington and then went on to make the national and the Olympic team. And when we got to the Olympics we didn't win the medal. We came in sixth and we made the final but came in last. And then I walked away thinking oh my gosh I'm a loser because I had been so used to winning.

Washington, we were a winning team, national champions. And rowing started out as this fun thing for me to do. I hadn't been an athlete in high school and all of a sudden I was at the University of Washington, rowing became a group, a connection. And I got in shape and I loved it. And then I started to do well at it and then I had to keep doing well at it. And the stakes kept getting higher and higher. I became the stroke or the leader of

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the boat. And then we had to win nationals. And then I had to make the national team and on and on.

And it was never what race I'd just won, it was kind of like, well, are you going to win the next race? So I never kind of felt full or expansive in like hey, we just won Pac-10s or hey we won nationals. Because it was like oh my gosh, what's going to happen next year?

Susan: I was thinking if you're not relating to this as an Olympian because you're not one like me. I'm not an Olympian. But I do hear this come up all the time when I'm working with business leaders and business teams. It's like they get to something and then it's like what's the next thing? Okay, we've built a good business now when are we going to sell it? Or when are we going to make it public? Or when are we going to do this next piece?

CrisMarie: Or even if you're in a larger organization you hit your numbers and you're like, yeah, we rocked it. And then executive management or leadership says, "Well, now you get no more people but your numbers are going to be double next year."

Susan: And I have to tell you, I work with even a meditation coach and it just cracks me up because it's like every time I get to the next number of how many minutes I should meditate today he's increased it. Now, I just think that's so funny, even in meditation.

CrisMarie: Well, so we live in this culture, this western culture of more, more, more or bigger is better. Even with our business at one point I said, "I want to hit this level. I think we need to be this level." And then Susan you asked me, "Why?" "We need to make this much revenue." And you're like, "Do you know what sort of business we would have if we hit that?"

Susan: And therein lies the difference in the question to ask because when I asked you why you had like, "We'd be more secure. We'd have more sustainable." You could answer that question. But when I said, "Tell me what it would look like when we were there. Tell me what that would be

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like.” And you started to describe what our day-to-day would look like. And you realized, wait a minute.

CrisMarie: I started to feel how that would be and I was like, “Oh my gosh, that’s not good.” And even with the Olympics what I learned out of, you know, literally I want you to know listeners, I walked around 10 years in just thinking I was just – I was a complete failure. That’s what I thought.

Susan: Well, I think we may have told this story before but it always comes up for me. I just remember when I ask you CrisMarie, because I was thrilled to meet an Olympian. And she just went, “Don’t talk to me about that. I was a loser.” I mean I was kind of stunned. I was like really, that’s the comeback.

CrisMarie: I think you said, “You should do some work on that.”

Susan: I did.

CrisMarie: And indeed I did. And as I processed through why I walked away and stuck in that I’m a loser is because I was unwilling to feel the impact of the grief of really, and when I went through wow, can I actually feel these feelings? What started to happen is I got me back. And I started to recognize all the benefits of going to the Olympics, walking into that Olympic stadium, being in the field of the athletes of all the different countries as we waited to walk into the Olympic stadium and meeting all these different people from different teams.

There were so many like oh my gosh, that was yummy and this was yummy.

Susan: And in your whole experience of going to Los Angeles and taking the shopping cart through the things.

CrisMarie: So before the Olympics what they do is they funneled us down into LA to one, give us some cultural training because we were going to be in Korea. It was in Seoul, Korea. But they also, we got to get our gear. And

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if you're a rower, you rowers know you get a t-shirt and that's all you get. So to get your gear what they did is they had this whole ballroom set up and it had, you don't see my hand but it's swimming through the room here. It had different booths, Calvin Klein and all these different ones.

And what you did is you went and you got your Calvin Klein jeans and underwear. And then you went to the next booth and you got your shoes, your running shoes, your top siders. Then you got your parade uniform, and then your sweat uniform, and your luggage. I mean they literally gave us a shopping cart and it was piled high and my eyes were like saucers. Never had I been given so much free stuff, it was just so cool.

Susan: Now, how often do you hear other Olympians talking about this rich moment in an Olympic experience? But it does, as I hear you talk about it I just am like wow. And there's so many things you've talked about that were rich moments, like walking into that stadium with all those different athletes, standing next to Carl Lewis.

CrisMarie: And it's true. I bumped into Carl Lewis' back, I'm like who is this wall I just hit? But I was not experiencing those in those 10 years. It was after I went through and recognized, wait a minute, I did that. I went to the Olympics. I got to reclaim all these parts of myself and experiences that kind of lifted me up and gave me more joy in my life, fulfillment and resource.

Susan: And I think, tell me where I'm wrong, CrisMarie, but this is also what has, I think supported you in being more fulfilled in the work you do as a consultant. Before you were kind of in that role of doing just the measures of what good business consultants do versus wait a minute, what more is possible in terms of a team?

CrisMarie: Well, when I worked for Arthur Andersen it was always like more, better, you've got to please the clients. You've got to get more clients. And I was so hard on myself and that system was also, it bred that, perform, perform, perform versus including more of myself. And when I

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include more of myself, one, I just have a better time. And two, I bring so much more humanness and fullness to the clients that I coach, the teams that we work with. When I speak, stories pop up that wouldn't have because I'm not trying to do it perfect and it's got to be like this.

Susan: And again I just want to say I have never seen you lose sight of the fact that it would be nice to win gold. And it's not even win gold but to actually be in a peak performance situation whether it was – and that's not actually always going to mean you win gold. But that place of this is important too has always mattered to you. You didn't lose it when you got the rest of the package back into the program.

CrisMarie: Susan, I think that's a good point. I think when I do a talk I practice. When I do an acting role I really practice. When we do things I really like to prepare. And that is a fun part. It's now more fun but I do – I have some discipline around it and work hard. But I have so much more of me that the whole experience becomes – I just have this felt sense of – you see my arms, you can't. But they're fuller.

I have a fuller experience versus perfectionism is – the way that I approached things before was – and can get at times just so narrow and black and white. And it's got to be, it's tight, I'm tight. It's not much fun. It's very serious and striving. And it's exhausting. That's my version of perfectionism which I don't like.

Susan: And coming from kind of the anti-perfectionist side of thing.

CrisMarie: Susan, anti-perfectionist.

Susan: I actually do want to put in that anti-perfectionism is really not that much difference than perfectionism.

CrisMarie: Say more, Susan.

Susan: In the sense that I can get so caught up in well, there's no way, sometimes when we have done something I am like, "Let's just put it out

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there.” And you’re like, “No, this is not even close to being ready to go.” And your standard is perfection and my standard is out there. And I have really realized the reason I don’t want to try to perfect sometimes is why I’m an anti-perfectionist is because I get into my fear of failing. And I don’t actually think of it as well, wait a minute, fulfilling, how could this be more fulfilling?

And when I ask myself that question it’s a whole different thing. So when I’m in the anti-perfection I’m not actually like, “But what would make this more fulfilling?” Another question to ask myself which would be putting a little more work and time into it, practicing, maybe adding doing a spell check on something I write. Or something, but when I’m in that other role I’m so afraid of failing because I’m dyslexic or whatever, I don’t want to do it and it’s like a rebel.

CrisMarie: It’s interesting Susan because I think what drives the anti-perfectionism, we’ve just coined a new term by the way, and perfectionism are both fear based. And I think what I’m hearing you say is, “Hey, I don’t want to try to do something well and then fail because then I’ll feel more disappointed.” Is that fair?

Susan: Or I’ll just feel worse about myself. I’ll go more into self-hate, or self-blame, or shame really. It taps me into my shame which is I don’t think I’ve ever associated perfectionism or anti-perfectionism with shame. But it’s a way that I limit myself. And if I was just willing to kind of acknowledge that shame and then I could do something different.

CrisMarie: Because I think I can really relate on the perfectionism side like oh my gosh, I used to row like okay if I do this race perfectly or even at Arthur Andersen, if I really sell this client or this project goes really well then all these good things will happen. And if it doesn’t then I feel that sense of shame or abandonment like I’m going to be rejected.

Susan: Yeah because I mean – and we weren’t going to talk about this but I’m just going to bring it up because it’s top of mind right now. But I think

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about all the work right now that's going on around diversity and inclusion and people struggling with how to do it. Now, the people that are trying to do this perfectly, it's like...

CrisMarie: Well, what that means if you're trying to do it perfectly is what are all the right words, how can I learn about this other culture and make sure I don't make a mistake because if I make a mistake then I'll be shamed and I'll be embarrassed. And that's just very rigid.

Susan: It is very rigid. And I think this is a Brené Brown thing, it's not do it right but am I doing the right thing? And sometimes doing the right thing means trying not to do it perfectly. The right thing would be perfect. So doing, am I doing, am I going towards the right thing means yes, I might make a mistake and I can recover.

CrisMarie: Yeah. And this is even your quote Susan, it's not what I do, it's what I do next. And when we're working with teams to build this culture of really it's a quality of you want diverse people but you also, when you have those diverse people around the table you want this felt sense of inclusion and belonging. And sometimes people are going to make a mistake and say something that's tone deaf or really tacky. And they may have no awareness of it.

And our job is to actually let's slow down, check this out and have the conversation to support, one, helping that person know their impact and bridging a gap between that comment, that person and how it might have impacted somebody else.

Susan: Yes. That's like filling it out versus crossing the finish line which are two very different things. Maybe ask yourself, for me, I mean I remember when I used to play basketball. The question for me always at the end of the game was not, I didn't look at my stats. They were not really going to bring me a lot of joy. And there was one year where we were owing 22, so even looking at the chart wasn't. So it became a question of what did I like

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that I did? What went well? What were the moments that, you know, and what did I not like?

Or did I do my best? These are questions that are kind of classic things that we, you know, and children's teams, you want to make sure you ask. On adult teams we forget to ask.

CrisMarie: It's true. And I think I was trained early on just to look at the results. And what started to happen is I stopped myself from ever acknowledging, hey, that was a job well done or you should feel proud of yourself. I was like, no; because I didn't hit the number I don't get to feel good. And that is so dehumanizing. It doesn't help me go forward in any way. It's kind of that beating myself up as a way of motivating myself. And I think that's often, perfectionists do that. And it's really not very healthy or it doesn't really support people doing more.

Susan: Yes. I mean and when we're working with businesses, I mean these days, businesses, a lot of businesses are using kind of the concept of OKRs which are Objectives and Key Results and then KPIs, Key Performance Indicators. And now I have seen situations where those are very numbers driven. And I also have seen situations where there is a little bit more of a qualitative as well as quantitative aspect to it which I think is a healthier way to get to that bigger piece.

And when we go in and work with teams often they already have their big business long term goals. And we are talking to them more about what we call a rallying cry or a thematic, how are you going to move your business down the road? And we say, "That should really be qualitative, short term and qualitative because you want the hearts and minds of your team engaged in that."

CrisMarie: So, Susan, I think what you're saying which I think is really important is not to make the goal the rally cry which is usually a short hop, like a quarter focus. Not to make it numbers driven, we want to get x

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amount of revenue. But make it qualitative, inspiring, so people want to partake in it, are excited about hey, let's accomplish this.

Susan: And this does come down to even something as simple, yes, it could be motivating to say, "We want to hit this numeric thing", it could be. But the problem is you don't always have the same level of control over that. Whereas is you're like, "We want a successful launch of this new product line that engages our people and our customers." That's very different and you get a sense of well, that's something I can control.

CrisMarie: And it's not like you don't have metrics. What we suggest is that top line, that one sentence, I love that, a successful product launch, it engages our people and our customers. And then you look at the buckets of activity. So how are we going to move the needle forward? And then below that you say, "And how are we going to measure? What are the qualitative number of sales, did we release on time", those things. Then you have a full picture so you have the inspiration. You have the activity and then you have the measures. But they're all different bits.

Susan: And then when you actually go at the end of the time to look at how you did you're not just looking at did I win gold. You're actually beginning to look at here's a bigger picture and how did we do against this? So it becomes a much more comprehensive opportunity to enrich the company.

CrisMarie: If I could back engineer my Olympic goal it would be have a life changing Olympic experience for the positive, for the better. And I think I kind of reclaimed that. So even if something has passed, a failure, and I often coach people who have faced failure and don't know how to actually integrate that and make more of it.

But I got to reclaim this awesome Olympic experience and use it now to tell stories, to coach people. And it's a huge resource for me. It's not this thing that I did shove in a closet for 10 years and hoped to forget, which a lot of times people deal with loss or failure to try to get rid of it in the perfectionistic model.

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Susan: Yes. I don't know whether I should go here or not but I'll go anyway. For me, the turning point for me to get this was actually around when I was in my 20s dealing with my cancers. And I think for me, cancer was something in my mind to get rid of.

CrisMarie: It was bad.

Susan: The goal was to cure my cancer. And it wasn't until I was actually with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who invited me to think of it differently because she's like, "I say go do whatever you need to do to make sure you're ready to die if you need to die but in the meantime focus on living. Quit because right now you're focusing on dying."

And it was such a profound thing because she's like, "As long as your end goal is to cure cancer you don't have control over that fully. But you do have control over how you're going to live in relationship to what's going on inside your body and live as fully and completely as you can. Because if you just focus on getting rid of cancer I don't think that's going to be..."

CrisMarie: You're in a fight model. And it sounds like she was saying, "Hey, live fully for however long that's going to be", six months which is the prediction that you had from the doctors or...

Susan: Longer.

CrisMarie: Yeah.

Susan: And I still to this day, because we struggle, you're like, "Tell people, you cured." And I'm like, "I don't actually feel like I cured cancer. I feel like I lived life." And that is really important for me because I think one thing about cancer, maybe not everyone knows but we all have cancer cells all the time. Some of us tend to have less, sometimes it blows up. And so it helped me not to think of it. I just think of, no, I'm embracing living life and I'm not looking at it from the other.

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CrisMarie: I think that's so important, Susan, and I appreciate you sharing your cancer experience. And I think sometimes in my perfectionistic model I can really narrow the view of my life to, are we succeeding in business? It's usually that. And I miss so much more. I don't live fully because I'm not like – I mean I've had practice now expanding that like, look, we have this garden. And my relationship to my family is much more important right now and friends. And look at all these connections.

So there is much more to life than when we make it so narrow that basically I think in the perfectionistic model that I have followed I treat myself as an object and I don't matter, only my results do. And that's so dehumanizing and it disconnects me from source, or spirit, or my natural inspiration that I've reconnected to that drives me to do or inspires me to do so many other things.

Susan: Yes. So I've found this to be quite a rich conversation.

CrisMarie: You have to say one other thing about the Indigo's Girls.

Susan: Yes. So part of one of the things that inspired this is I have taken up guitar lessons which, you know, and one of my favorite songs is an Indigo Girl song called Closer to Fine which I decided to take on as a project to learn.

CrisMarie: It is a hard project.

Susan: Yeah, I could be three to four years before I learn how to play this song, although I have gotten better at the guitar trying. But one of the lines in the song that I just love because this whole thing is about her talking about her pursuit of what life is like. We go to the mountain. We drink. We turn towards the children. We try to find philosophy. We do all sorts of things to try to find the answer.

And then there is this line where it's there's more than one answer to these questions pointing me in a crooked line. And the less I seek my source for definitive.

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CrisMarie: So less that I seek for the right answer.

Susan: Yes, the closer I am to fine. And I love that. I just think that is such – I'm hoping that's going to be my way for guitar playing as well, but all sorts of things in life.

CrisMarie: Well, I think we think, okay, I've got to have the shortest line, straight line and it's a very – one, it's a very masculine brain linear focus versus life doesn't happen that way. We are on a crooked line. And when we kind of let that happen we relax and let more in. But is this idea about – I can't remember where I'm talking, The Mighty Ducks, The Mighty Ducks, the Disney team. So there's a new show on The Mighty Ducks on the Disney channel and it's really cute.

But we went back and watched the original Mighty Ducks which is all about this little scrappy team because they're not very good when they start because this mom really wants her kids to have a good time. And what is hockey about? And it's the same kind of perfectionistic, we're winning at all costs versus hey, we do want to win but we also want to have a good time.

Susan: And what I love about the show is yes, they start to bring more of the joy in but there is this one, her son actually who is a good hockey player. He's like, "I want to have fun but I also don't want to be beaten up by all the teams that are better than us. We actually need to get good at hockey." Which I think is a good thing too, it brings in, yes, you can work to improve your skills. And you can also enjoy and take fulfillment in it, both things are true.

CrisMarie: Yeah. What I've learned more recently with just people who have passed away that this journey in life is short. And yes, I want to perform and I want to perform really well but I also want to enjoy the ride. And so if you're struggling with perfectionism, just think about that. And you don't have to keep responding the way you always have. You have more choice.

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And certainly reach out if you want more coaching around that because we're happy to help. Or if your team is struggling around creating goals that really inspire and then measure results that's separating those things, we can certainly help there too. Okay, you have a good week.

Susan: Thank you for listening to *The Beauty of Conflict* podcast. We know conflict, stress and uncertainty can be hard to navigate.

CrisMarie: We want to support you becoming more resilient, able to speak up and have healthy relationships and business teams that thrive. Connect to us on LinkedIn at Thrive Inc. Learn how we can work with you, your team, or your company at thriveinc.com. That's www.t.h.r.i.v.e.i.n.c.com.

Susan: We hope you have a peaceful, productive and beautiful day.

CrisMarie: Take care.