

Standards Without the Stick

How to Hold a High Bar and Still Be on Your Own Side

"Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor."

— Anne Lamott

Most people who consider easing up on themselves hit the same fear within seconds: if the harsh voice goes quiet, the work will get worse. That fear assumes the standard and the punishment are a single thing, so that loosening the second must lower the first. They are separate tools and always have been. A standard describes what good work looks like. Harshness is only what you do to yourself when the work falls short of it.

This report is about the first of those two tools, the one worth keeping. The nine tips that follow deal with how a standard gets set, described, checked, and revised, because a bar defined clearly enough will hold itself up without anything standing behind it to enforce it. Read them as a practical set of moves for work you are doing this month, not as a philosophy of achievement.

Tip 1: Set the Bar Before You Start

Decide what good looks like for a piece of work before you begin it, not after you finish and start judging the result. A standard set in advance functions as a target you are aiming at, while the same standard applied afterward functions as a verdict you are receiving. Before your next

substantial task, spend two minutes writing down the three things that would make it good, then work toward those.

Tip 2: Make the Standard Specific Enough to Meet

A standard you cannot check is not a standard, it is a mood. Words like excellent, professional, and thorough give you nothing to measure against, so the work never clearly arrives, and the harsh voice fills the empty space with its own assessment. Replace each vague quality with something observable: a length, a checklist, a turnaround time, a specific reader who would find it useful.

Tip 3: Decide What Finished Looks Like

Most overwork happens because nobody ever defined the stopping point. Without an agreed finish line, every piece of work stays technically improvable, and the decision to stop starts to feel like a concession rather than a completion. Write your stopping criteria at the same moment you write the standard, keep them to a short list, and treat meeting that list as permission to put the work down.

Tip 4: Hold the Work to the Standard, Not Yourself

Standards apply to output, and only to output. When one gets applied to a person instead, it stops functioning as a standard and becomes a claim about character, which gives you nothing you can act on. Notice

the difference between the third section is unclear and I am a sloppy writer, then keep every review you conduct of your own work phrased in the first form.

Tip 5: Give the Standard a Ceiling

A high standard has a top. Harshness does not, which is why work governed by it never feels finished no matter how good it gets, and why the bar quietly rises every time you get close to it. Set the level once, in writing, and hold it steady for the duration of the project, resisting the urge to raise it mid-task simply because the work is going well.

Tip 6: Let Structure Carry the Pressure

The harsh voice is often doing a job that structure can do better and at far lower cost. Deadlines, scheduled reviews, commitments made to other people, and limited working windows all apply pressure from outside, which leaves nothing for self-criticism to supply. Pick the piece of work you most rely on internal pressure to finish and give it an external deadline that somebody else knows about.

Tip 7: Check Whether the Standard Is Actually Yours

Some of the bars you hold yourself to were set by somebody else and have not been reviewed since. An inherited standard tends to be both higher and vaguer than one you chose, because it arrived as an attitude rather than as a specification. Take one standard you hold, ask where it

originally came from, then decide deliberately whether to keep it, adjust it, or let it go.

Tip 8: Raise One Bar at a Time

Standards raised everywhere at once produce a workload nobody can meet, which then reads as personal failure rather than as the planning error it is. Improvement is far more reliable when a single area is chosen, and the rest are held at their current level for the same period. Choose one thing to be better at this quarter, name it, and give everything else explicit permission to stay where it is.

Tip 9: Ask What the Next Version Needs

Once work has been reviewed, the useful question points forward rather than backward. What this one lacked produces a list of faults, while what the next one needs produces a list of instructions, and only the second list is something you can work from. End every review by writing two or three things the next attempt will do differently, then close the file.

Key Insight

The bar and the stick were never the same tool. A standard describes the work you are aiming at. Harshness is only what happens when you miss. Put the standard in writing and it will hold itself up, with nothing standing behind it.

Fast Action Steps

These two steps put the ideas above into contact with work you are actually doing. Each takes a few minutes and asks for something written down rather than something considered.

Action 1: Write One Standard Down

Choose a piece of work due in the next week and define good before you begin it. Three specific, checkable qualities are enough and writing them out tends to produce sharper criteria than holding them in your head. Keep the list visible while you work so the target stays in front of you rather than behind you.

For your next piece of work, what three specific qualities would make it good?

Action 2: Find a Standard You Never Chose

Look at the bars you hold yourself to and find one you can trace back to somebody else, a parent, an old manager, a former teacher, or an industry norm you never examined. Ask what it costs you to keep it and what it would cost to lower it. Then make an actual decision rather than leaving it in place by default.

Which standard are you holding that you did not choose, and what will you do with it?

Recommended Reading

These books deal with standards, performance, and the relationship between the two.

Recommended reading:

- Mindset by Carol Dweck
- Self-Compassion by Kristin Neff
- The Gifts of Imperfection by Brené Brown
- Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott
- Atomic Habits by James Clear
- Essentialism by Greg McKeown
- Grit by Angela Duckworth

**It is necessary,
and even vital,
to set standards
for your life and
the individuals
you allow in it.**

OSIRIS