

Use Failure's Lessons To Be a Better Leader

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Albert Einstein was four years old before he could speak and seven before he could read. When Thomas Edison was a boy, his teachers told him that he was too stupid to learn anything. A newspaper fired Walt Disney because he had "no good ideas." Beethoven's music teacher once said of him that as a composer, he was hopeless.

So what do you and I have in common with these landmark figures? At a minimum, we've all faced failure in our lives. No one goes through life unscathed. We can only hope that our failures will be mixed liberally with our successes, and we'll have had a life well lived.

Still, while there are no guarantees, there are ways in which you can turn the odds more in your favor. Specifically, success is most closely related to your reaction to your inevitable failures. This is true not only for you personally, but also in your role as a business manager and leader. Growth in an organization only comes with stretching and risk taking. There's a reason that your reach should slightly exceed your grasp. Particularly when you're trying something new, mistakes are inevitable. It's up to the leader to create an environment where people aren't afraid to fail. Mistakes should be seen as an integral part of the organizational process. Errors are simply a normal by-product of striving for excellence.

Obviously, some mistakes are easier to tolerate than others. Action should be taken when an error is made, but, ordinarily, it should be corrective action, not censure. Mistakes present a unique opportunity to teach and develop your staff. Growth and success can't come without risk taking, and progress doesn't occur without mistakes.

As a leader, one of the ways I've approached errors is by judging whether the action taken was a "mistake of the heart" or a "mistake of the head." A mistake of the heart is a situation in which an employee intentionally does something wrong and tries to get away with it. I tend to be very harsh in such situations. A mistake of the head occurs when an employee is working hard to do the right thing, but for some reason, it doesn't turn out that way. I tend to be very lenient on these types of mistakes. In fact, I have even on occasion praised people for making a mistake because their intentions were so good.

If you chastise employees for every mistake, their focus will be on self-preservation, not on striving for excellence. Instead of working to succeed, they'll work to avoid failure. These two approaches are vastly different. People working to avoid harsh criticism will do the least amount possible. They'll show little initiative and creativity, and they'll rarely do anything without authorization from the boss. They'll shirk from responsibility, and look for reasons to assert that it isn't their job. Mistakes might be avoided this way, but at the cost of long-term success. The goal for a leader isn't to avoid all possible failures. It's to avoid errors that can be easily foreseen, as well as risks that aren't worth the potential costs. Good leaders are willing to take risks to improve their operations. If you never try anything new, you can't possibly hope to improve. This is true for individuals, and it's true for organizations.

If you're in a position of leadership, let your employees know that it's acceptable, even beneficial at times, to make intelligent errors. To the greatest extent possible, be gentle with people when they've failed. Take the opportunity to coach and mentor them so they don't repeat the same mistake again.

Listed below are some points that may help you as you travel along the notoriously serpentine and uphill road to success:

- Clearly define your goals.
- Write a detailed plan of how to accomplish your goals.
- Be decisive; don't procrastinate once you make a plan.
- Be a lifelong learner. You must continue to educate yourself.
- Don't quit because you see failure as a possibility; have courage in the face of adversity.
- If you make mistakes, acknowledge your responsibility.
- Learn from your errors, so that in the future you're making new mistakes instead of repetitive ones.
- Be open to feedback and criticism.

Failure is a part of life for everyone. The difference for those judged successful in the long run is how they've responded to their failures. If after failing, you can dust yourself off, redouble your efforts and get right back into the game, chances are good you'll ultimately accomplish what you set out to do.

Winston Churchill said: "*Success is the ability to go from one failure to the next with great enthusiasm.*" I live by that motto.

The two hardest things in life to deal with are success and failure. If you adhere to Mr. Churchill's advice, your failures should be small and short in duration, and your successes large and long lasting.