

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Building on Failure

by Dr. Mike Armour

You've perhaps heard the old adage, "The only true failure is failure to learn." I, for one, concur.

Nothing is more telling in a leader's character than how he or she responds to major setbacks. This is particularly true if the setbacks are so large that we label them as failures.

Fundamentally, failure invites one of three responses. Excuses. Blaming. Or learning.

Two of these three — excuses and blaming — are debilitating, because they take our eye off of the future. So long as I'm offering excuses or assessing blame, I'm looking backward. And I'm doing nothing to engender optimism, hope, or new-found confidence for the future.

Reframing Failure

Only when we view failure in terms of what we've learned do we re-anchor ourselves in the present ("What are we learning?") and reorient ourselves toward the future ("How will what we're learning make us more effective going forward?")

No doubt you've heard the oft-repeated story of Thomas Edison and his response to his laboratory workers who were frustrated with their effort to develop a workable light bulb.

When they lamented to him about their 10,000 failed efforts to create a light bulb, Edison replied, "We have not failed 10,000 times. We've simply discovered 10,000 ways NOT to build a light bulb."

I'm not sure whether this story is apocryphal or not. But I can vouch for the veracity of another story that bespeaks the same spirit.

In the late 1970s, as the Silicon Valley was rapidly emerging, I heard an interview with the CEO of one of the Valley's fast-growing high-tech firms. His company was working on an innovative new method to store memory in microcomputers, which were then in their infancy.

The interviewer said, "It's commonly reported that you've tried 300 different designs for this new type of memory, and that all of them have failed."

Immediately the CEO shot back, "We have not failed 300 times. We've simply learned answers to 300 questions that we don't happen to be asking!"

Both Edison and this CEO understood that the greatest use of the past is to learn from it appropriately. When things went wrong, the first impulse of these two men was to ask, "What have we learned from this?"

Simply by asking this question, they reframed the experience from a backward-looking failure to future-facing knowledge.

Learning to Fail Creatively

One of my mentors was fond of saying, "Failure to learn is learning to fail." He also liked the mantra (which is one of the presuppositions of Neuro-Linguistic Programming) that "there are no failures, only learnings."

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is decidedly forward-looking. It builds on the common-sense notion that our future is a direct extension of what we've learned from the past.

If what we've learned from the past has saddled us with disabling beliefs, our future is far less promising than if we've learned enabling beliefs from the past.

So success depends on not merely learning from the past, but learning the right things from the past. To this end, recent leadership and business literature has given rise to the phrase "failing faster."

The concept behind this rather strange term is that the companies which achieve stellar success and maintain it are the ones which recognize a failure quickly, accept the failure, draw helpful learnings from it, and immediately make appropriate mid-course corrections, based on what they've learned.

This perspective posits failure as an inevitable component of the learning process. After all, we learned to ride a bicycle or catch a ball by learning from our failed attempts, didn't we? Why not apply this childhood development technique to all of life itself?

Yet, while much is said today about learning from failure, you seldom see anyone offer a methodology for doing it to maximum benefit. Lately I've been thinking a lot about the process of learning from failure. What's the best way to go about doing it?

In a future newsletter I hope to share more on this topic with you once I've clarified and simplified the methodology more fully in my own mind. But let me offer a preview of one of the most important elements in the process.

A Question about Questions

Recently, while gleaning learnings from a well-planned initiative in my own company that completely flopped, I realized the importance of a particular question when learning from failure. The question is actually a question about questions. Here it is: "What were the critical questions that we failed to ask, or did not know to ask?"

Just posing this question forces us to look at the untested assumptions that guided our planning and decisions. In my case, failure to test those assumptions contributed more heavily than anything else to the failure.

By answering this question about questions, I've armed myself with a better set of questions to ask when evaluating opportunities in the future.

Indeed, expertise is often less about mastering a body of knowledge than it is about knowing the right questions to ask. So hopefully, by equipping me with a better set of questions, this failure has given me some added expertise in planning major new initiatives.

Basically we can do only three things with the past. We can ignore it. We can mire ourselves in it. Or we can learn from it.

George Santayana famously said that those who choose to ignore the past are doomed to repeat it. Equally ill-advised is being mired in the past.

Some people mire themselves in the past by clinging tenaciously to joys, glories, or relationships that have been forever lost. Others mire themselves in the past by wallowing in its misfortunes.

In either case, to the degree that we mire ourselves in the past, we put ourselves in a position of being stuck in the past. Only when we learn from the past do we optimize the future.

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