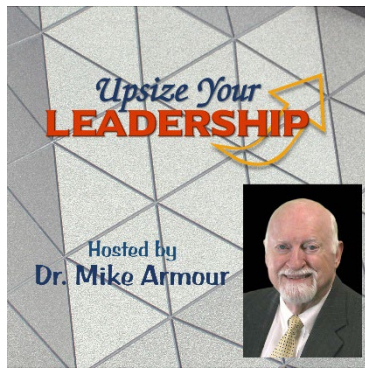


What's Your First Impulse in Failure?

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Episode UYL2215

Podcast Date: June 30, 2022



Most highly successful people whom I know have had a common experience. Along the way they have all had serious, if not catastrophic failures. They've made some horrendous miscalculations.

The same can be said of legendary companies. We remember their iconic products and brand names. But we forget the flops which they also produced.

Apple technology – especially the iPhone, which turned 15 this week – has changed the world. But do you remember the Apple Newton? Or the Apple Lisa? Or the Apple Pippin? Or perhaps their greatest dud, the round mouse? Probably not. Except for the Lisa, which managed to survive for three years, none of these products lasted more than two years before they were pulled from the market.

Failure therefore puts you in great company.

My question today is, what's your instinctive response when you fail? What's your first impulse when things go wrong in wholesale fashion?

After coaching nearly 800 executives, managers, and entrepreneurs, I've been "behind the scenes" as these talented men and women confronted large-scale failure. Some of them never recovered. Others went on to stellar success.

Those who never recovered compounded the initial failure by making still another one. They chose the wrong response to the failure. For one thing, they failed to raise the right questions about why the failure occurred. Today's podcast introduces you to perhaps the most instructive question which they should have considered. Learning to ask it is a powerful way to upsize your leadership.

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 failures.

The simple truth is, if you're going to strive for success, failure comes with the territory. Some failures may be small. Some may be highly consequential. But failure will be part of the mix.

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

Two of these three 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.

When you experience failure, which of these three is your first impulse. Do you start ticking off excuses? Do you start pointing a finger of blame?

Or is your first impulse to say, "What can I learn from this which will make me more successful in the future?"

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

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 on a quest to develop an innovative new way to process the 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 they have all failed."

Immediately the CEO shot back, "We have not failed 300 times. We've simply learned answers to 300 questions that did not happen to be asking at the time."

Then he hurriedly added, "But one of these days the industry WILL be asking those questions, and we already know the answers."

Here was a man who understood that the greatest use of the past is to learn from it appropriately. When things went wrong, his first impulse was to ask, "What have we learned from this?"

One of my mentors was fond of saying, "Failure to learn is learning to fail." He also liked the mantra, "There are no failures. Only learnings."

And he was literally correct in his belief. We always learn from failure. The problem is, we often learn the wrong lesson. We can conclude from failure that we're just not capable of succeeding or that life is rigged against us. This type of learning does nothing to empower us for the future or to make the prospects of future success any more promising.

Success depends, therefore, on not merely learning from the past, but learning the right things from the past. It was this outlook which gave rise to the phrase "failing faster."

The concept behind this rather strange term is that companies which achieve stellar success and maintain it are those 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 failed attempts, didn't we? Why not apply this childhood development technique to all of life itself?

The best way to learn from mistakes, of course, is by asking questions. What went wrong? Why did it happen? What could we have done to keep it from occurring?

I've personally had plenty of occasions to work through this litany of questions after something failed miserably.

One such occasion was about ten years ago. I had done a ton of research before going into the undertaking. Our planning was extensive. And we had strong, public endorsements from powerful and influential people.

Yet the effort still failed, and spectacularly so, to the tune of nearly \$300,000 of my own money.

While regrouping from the failure, I was asking myself the very kinds of questions which I mentioned moments ago. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a question popped into my mind which had never occurred to me before. It proved so pivotal in making sense of what had happened that I now consider it my most useful tool when learning from failure.

It's actually a question about questions. Here it is. "What were the critical questions which we either failed to ask or did not know to ask?"

Just posing this question forced me to look at the untested assumptions which had set the framework for my planning and decisions.

It turned out that not testing certain key assumptions contributed more heavily than anything else to my failure.

By answering the question about questions, I've now 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. Hopefully, by equipping myself with a better set of questions, this failure has given me added expertise in planning new initiatives.

What you're hearing me say is that success is not built while dwelling on the past. And it's certainly not built while endlessly incriminating ourselves for what went wrong.

Success is about getting back on your feet once you've been knocked down, dusting yourself off, and fixing your gaze once more on the future.

So let me recommend two things to you. First, if your initial impulse in response to failure is to start blaming or making excuses, resolve to change that habit. Doing so may take time, because this habitual response is probably quite embedded in your thought pattern. You've resorted to it so often that it fires off automatically.

Now you have to break that habit. When something goes wrong and you instantly start compiling a catalog of excuses or a list of people to blame, interrupt your thought pattern. Shift immediately into a learning mode. Start asking questions about what you can learn from the experience.

Make this interruption every time you start playing the excuse game or the blame game. Over time, you can habituate yourself to move immediately into a learning exercise when failure occurs.

Second, as you move from excuse-making and blaming to learning, make the question about questions one of the first things you ask. Here it is again. "What were the critical questions which we either failed to ask or did not know to ask?"

This will immediately start arming you for the future rather than rehashing to little benefit what went wrong in the past.

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.

If we ignore the past, we learn nothing from it. As George Santayana famously said, those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it. Becoming mired in the past likewise limits the opportunity to learn.

Some people mire themselves in the past by clinging tenaciously to joys, glories, or relationships which have been forever lost. Others mire themselves in the past by wallowing in their 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, and learning properly from the past, do we optimize the promise which the future holds.

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