



Fail More Often

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In our society, it is considered a bad thing to fail. From our earliest memory, we are all taught to succeed at what we try. It does not matter if it is taking a few steps on wobbly legs or negotiating an international merger of two huge organizations, we are conditioned that success is the goal and failure is anathema. Through this conditioning, we are taught to feel great when we have a success and to feel awful when we fail.

Take away the stigma of the word, and a failure is simply an attempt to do something that did not work out as planned. In the learning process, we obtain more information, momentum, resolve, inspiration, insight, and knowledge when we fail than when we succeed. To succeed is to get something done, but we have not learned very much. For example, without the corrective adjustments by ourselves and our parents, we would never learn to walk or talk. It is the constant reshaping of past tries that cause our forward progress.

I think it is time to embrace failure and to stop feeling bad about it. What we need in life is more at-bats rather than more home runs. Each time we go for something new, we risk failure, but not taking that risk is a bigger problem, because we block our own advancement.

The most often-quoted example of this theory is the story of Thomas Edison, who found that carbonized bamboo filaments worked well for his light bulb. His most famous quotation is, "I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 things that won't work." He also acknowledged that by being creative while simultaneously inventive, he was able to develop things that seemed like serendipity, but they were really the culmination of a lot of hard work and numerous failures. He once said, "Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to doesn't mean it's useless."

The key to embracing failure is to let go of the stigma and seek out the learning potential in every activity. They ought to teach a course on failing in grammar school. Kids should be introduced to the theory that to fail, as long as something was learned, is the route to eventual success. Instead, we hammer home the idea that to fail is to not

live up to expectations. Children learn to fear rather than embrace failure. That attitude permeates our society, and it has a crippling effect on every organization.

Another aspect of failure is the idea that we never really fail until we quit trying. As long as we are stretching to achieve a goal, we have the potential for success. I love the quotation from Vince Lombardi who said, "We never lost a game, but sometimes we just ran out of quarters."

I believe there needs to be good judgment when deciding how long to persevere. I do not think Winston Churchill was right when he said "Never, never, never, quit." At some point, it is time to learn a lesson and leave the battlefield. It is okay to have a discarded scheme or to recognize a blind alley and cut your losses. It is important to recognize when we have run out of quarters, but it is wrong to quit trying prematurely. I think the difference between those two mindsets is the difference between genius and mediocrity.

I am not advocating that we fail on purpose. Doing things right should always be the objective. What I want to champion is that the only thing to avoid is making the same mistake over and over again. Some people focus on being busy just to have something to do. Thomas Edison had a quote for that too. He said, "Being busy does not always mean real work."

Try having a "Experience Award" at work for daring to risk. Honor people who stretch and try but fail, as long as they learn from the experience. Doing this will seem unorthodox and "over the top" to many stuffy managers who will not tolerate things that are irregular. Too bad these managers are leaving real creativity off the table.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

