

Failing Your Way to Success

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In a recent television interview, Whoopie Goldberg described how she got her first one-woman show in New York: Whoopie was performing her nightclub act and (the director) Mike Nichols was in the audience. He came backstage and offered to create a show for her in a Broadway theater. Whoopie said she didn't know if that was such a good idea. What if she were lousy? Mike asked if she'd ever been lousy before and Whoopie said "Sure!" His response was, "Then it's no big deal. You'll just be lousy on Broadway."

To me, that reply was brilliant!

Fear of failure is one of the biggest obstacles to success. Yet every major achievement is preceded by many failures. It's the lessons you learn from your mistakes, how well you apply those lessons to future endeavors, and how quickly you bounce back, that matter in the long run.

Great leaders know this is true. Tom Watson, Sr., the founder of IBM was often quoted as saying, "The way to accelerate your rate of success is to double your failure rate." One of my clients, a savvy executive in a Fortune 500 company agrees: "I tell my folks to make at least 10 mistakes a day. If they're not making that many mistakes each day, they're not trying hard enough."

But, oh my, how we human beings hate to fail. So sometimes we need a little encouragement to overcome that fear. Here's where leaders can step in . . .

The general manager of an insurance company, concerned that her salespeople were so afraid of failure that they hesitated to take even well calculated risks, took action at a sales meeting. She put two \$100 bills on the table and related her most recent failure, along with the lesson she had learned from it, then she challenged anyone else at the meeting to relate a bigger failure and "win" the \$200. When no one spoke up, she scooped up the money and said that she would repeat her offer at each monthly sales meeting. From the second month on, the manager never again got to keep the \$200, and as people began to discuss their failures, the sales department became more successful, quadrupling their earnings in one year.

"Failure is not a crime. Failure to learn from failure is," said Walter Wriston, the former chairman of CitiCorp. But it can be difficult for people in an organization to have a genuine discussion about failure that doesn't include blame or rationalization. To facilitate this kind of productive conversation, the United States Army developed the After Action Reviews. AARs are now used by organizations around the world to help employees learn from their mistakes, prevent future errors, and find new solutions to problems.

Basically, the AAR process assembles people who were involved in a planned project or event and asks them to answer these questions:

1. What was the desired outcome?
2. What was the actual outcome?
3. Why were there differences between what we wanted and what we achieved?
4. What did we learn? (What would we do differently next time?)

Organizations looking to increase innovation are also finding ways to encourage and even reward mistakes. DuPont's Textile Fibers Division awards a quarterly "failure trophy." The failed efforts must have been ethically sound, recognized as failures quickly, and learned from thoroughly. DuPont realizes that insight and knowledge come as much from failure as they do from success. Understanding what doesn't work may be at least as important as understanding

what does, especially if these errors are revealed early in a project when few resources have been committed and other approaches can be tested.

The heart of creativity is trial and error. Thomas Edison's early attempts to come up with the right filament for the light bulb were dismal failures. He tried a thousand different materials - with no success. A colleague asked him if he felt his time had been wasted, since he had discovered nothing. "Hardly," Edison is said to have retorted. "I have discovered a thousand things that don't work."

What about you? Had any good failures lately?

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