Why Failure Is Good for Success

To achieve the greatest success, you have to embrace the prospect of failure.

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The sweetest victory is the one that’s most difficult. The one that requires you to reach down deep inside, to fight with everything you’ve got, to be willing to leave everything out there on the battlefield—without knowing, until that do-or-die moment, if your heroic effort will be enough.

Society doesn’t reward defeat, and you won’t find many failures documented in history books. The exceptions are those failures that become steppingstones to later success. Such is the case with Thomas Edison, whose most memorable invention was the light bulb, which purportedly took him 1,000 tries before he developed a successful prototype. “How did it feel to fail 1,000 times?” a reporter asked. “I didn’t fail 1,000 times,” Edison responded. “The light bulb was an invention with 1,000 steps.”

Unlike Edison, many of us avoid the prospect of failure. In fact, we’re so focused on not failing that we don’t aim for success, settling instead for a life of mediocrity. When we do make missteps, we gloss over them, selectively editing out the miscalculations or mistakes in our life’s résumé.

“Failure is not an option,” NASA flight controller Jerry C. Bostick reportedly stated during the mission to bring the damaged Apollo 13 back to Earth, and that phrase has been etched into the collective memory ever since.

To many in our success-driven society, failure isn’t just considered a non-option—it’s deemed a deficiency, says Kathryn Schulz, author of Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error. “Of all the things we are wrong about, this idea of error might well top the list,” Schulz says. “It is our meta-mistake: We are wrong about what it means to be wrong. Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition.”

Life’s Greatest Teacher

When we take a closer look at the great thinkers throughout history, a willingness to take on failure isn’t a new or extraordinary thought at all. From the likes of Augustine, Darwin and Freud to the business mavericks and sports legends of today, failure is as powerful a tool as any in reaching great success.

“Failure and defeat are life’s greatest teachers [but] sadly, most people, and particularly conservative
corporate cultures, don’t want to go there,” says Ralph Heath, managing partner of Synergy Leadership Group and author of Celebrating Failure: The Power of Taking Risks, Making Mistakes and Thinking Big. “Instead they choose to play it safe, to fly below the radar, repeating the same safe choices over and over again. They operate under the belief that if they make no waves, they attract no attention: no one will yell at them for failing because they generally never attempt anything great at which they could possibly fail (or succeed).”

However, in today’s post-recession economy, some employers are no longer shying away from failure—they’re embracing it. According to a recent article in BusinessWeek, many companies are deliberately seeking out those with track records reflecting both failure and success, believing that those who have been in the trenches, survived battle and come out on the other side have irreplaceable experience and perseverance. They’re veterans of failure.

The prevailing school of thought in progressive companies—such as Intuit, General Electric, Corning and Virgin Atlantic—is that great success depends on great risk, and failure is simply a common byproduct. Executives of such organizations don’t mourn their mistakes but instead parlay them into future gains.

“The quickest road to success is to possess an attitude toward failure of ‘no fear,’” says Heath. “To do their work well, to be successful and to keep their companies competitive, leaders and workers on the front lines need to stick their necks out a mile every day. They have to deliver risky, edgy, breakthrough ideas, plans, presentations, advice, technology, products, leadership, bills and more. And they have to deliver all this fearlessly—without any fear whatsoever of failure, rejection or punishment.”

**Reaching Your Potential**

The same holds true for personal quests, whether in overcoming some specific challenge or reaching your full potential in all aspects of life. To achieve your personal best, to reach unparalleled heights, to make the impossible possible, you can’t fear failure, you must think big, and you have to push yourself.

When we think of people with this mindset, we imagine the daredevils, the pioneers, the inventors, the explorers: They embrace failure as a necessary step to unprecedented success.

But you don’t have to walk a tightrope, climb Mount Everest or cure polio to employ this mindset in your own life. When the rewards of success are great, embracing possible failure is key to taking on a variety of challenges, whether you’re reinventing yourself by starting a new business or allowing
yourself to trust another person to build a deeper relationship.

“To achieve any worthy goal, you must take risks,” says writer and speaker John C. Maxwell. In his book Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success, he points to the example of legendary aviator Amelia Earhart, who set several records and achieved many firsts in her lifetime, including being the first female pilot to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean. Although her final flight proved fateful, Maxwell believes she knew the risk—and that the potential reward was worth it. “[Earhart’s] advice when it came to risk was simple and direct: ‘Decide whether or not the goal is worth the risks involved. If it is, stop worrying.’”

Of course, the risks you take should be calculated: you shouldn’t fly blindly into the night and simply hope for the best. Achieving the goal or at least waging a heroic effort requires preparation, practice and some awareness of your skills and talents.

**Easing Into a Fearless Mindset**

“One of the biggest secrets to success is operating inside your strength zone but outside of your comfort zone,” Heath says. Although you might fail incredibly, you might succeed incredibly—and that’s why incredible risk and courage are requisite. Either way, you’ll learn more than ever about your strengths, talents and resolve, and you’ll strengthen your will for the next challenge.

If this sounds like dangerous territory, it can be. But there are ways to ease into this fearless mindset. The first is to consciously maintain a positive attitude so that, no matter what you encounter, you’ll be able to see the lessons of the experience and continue to push forward.

“It’s true that not everyone is positive by nature,” says Maxwell, who cites his father as someone who would describe himself as a negative person by nature. “Here’s how my dad changed his attitude. First he made a choice: He continually chooses to have a positive attitude. Second, he’s continually reading and listening to materials that bolster that attitude. For example, he’s read The Power of Positive Thinking many times. I didn’t get it at first, so once I asked him why. His response: ‘Son, I need to keep filling the tank so I can stay positive.’”

Heath recommends studying the failures and subsequent reactions of successful people and, within a business context, repeating such histories for others. “Reward them and applaud their efforts in front of the entire organization so everyone understands it is OK to fail. So employees say to themselves, ‘I see that Bill, the vice president of widgets, who the president adores, failed, and he is not only back at work, but he is driving a hot new sports car. I can fail and come to work the next day. Bill is proof of it.’”
Finally, Heath stays motivated by the thought that, “if I become complacent and don’t take risks, someone will notice what I am doing and improve upon my efforts over time, and put me out of work. You’ve got to keep finding better ways to run your life, or someone will take what you’ve accomplished, improve upon it, and be very pleased with the results. Keep moving forward or die.”