

## **Leadership Barometer 162 Fail More Often** **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



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.

We are conditioned that success is the goal and failure is anathema. We are taught to feel great when we have a success and to feel awful when we fail.

### **We learn more from failure than from success**

Take away the stigma, and a failure is simply something that did not work out as planned. 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, we would never learn to walk or talk. It is the constant reshaping of past tries that causes our forward progress.

### **Embrace failure**

I think it is time to embrace failure and 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. We block our own advancement.

### **Thomas Edison**

The most often-quoted example of this theory is the story of Thomas Edison. He 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 championed being creative while simultaneously inventive. He was able to develop things that seemed like serendipity. 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."

### **Let go of the stigma**

The key to embracing failure is to let go of the stigma. Seek out the learning potential in every activity. They ought to teach a course on failing in grammar school.

Teach kids 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.

### **Don't quit trying**

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. Recall the quotation from Vince Lombardi, "We never lost a game, but sometimes we just ran out of quarters."

### **Use judgment**

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. 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. 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."

### **How to make the shift in thinking**

Try having an "Experience Award" at work for daring to try something unusual. 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.

## **Conclusion**

If we learn to embrace failure, we can enrich our lives in many ways. The notion that we should always succeed is highly limiting in the end. When we recast the role of failure as a huge enabler of growth we actually win.

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