

MAKE FAILURE YOUR FRIEND

by Glenn Williams



Relax; you will Fail

Failure is inevitable. If you're breathing, you will fail at things. It's part of the human experience, yet most of us will do almost anything to avoid it. Why? What's the problem with failing? The issue for most of us is that we fear it. We fear failure because we have a core belief that it's not that we've failed at something but that we are failures.

Most of us grew up believing that failure is equivalent to a character flaw instead of the evidence that we gave something a go. It's a fear that crosses generational and cultural divides—that of being regarded as incompetent, incapable, and even weak.

It sounds wild when you put it in black and white, but it's the reality most people face. The real pressure to succeed kicks in as we begin our educational journey. Western schools emphasise "getting it right" rather than embracing a quest for knowledge, innovation, and invention. This sense of right and wrong ways to do things only compounds when we finally launch into a career.

By the time we reach management and leadership positions, we're well and truly immersed in a culture of success that views failure as an unnecessary risk or the result of incompetence. The tragedy is that this culture produces the opposite of what it seeks to encourage. It produces generations of risk-averse people who are scared to make mistakes for fear of humiliation or punishment.

Paradoxically, we celebrate those who have taken significant risks, overcoming great odds and multiple setbacks to achieve greatness, although it's often decades, if not hundreds of years, after the event.

Failure isn't final

"It's important to acknowledge that our perspectives on such situations are precisely that, perspectives. Flawed or otherwise, the CEO and I both had a perspective that became our reality. My challenge was not to prove I was in the right, the victim, or even to seek restitution. Instead, it was to sit in the reality of how the situation affected me and the opportunities now before me.

Would I be resilient enough to learn from this experience and use it to grow as a person and leader? Over time, I discovered it also takes humility, no small amount of patience, and the ability to forgive, perhaps the most challenging thing to do."

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A case in point is the Dyson Vacuum Cleaner. James Dyson's bagless invention, now found in millions of homes worldwide, only exists because he regarded every failure as a stepping stone to success.

It took him fifteen years and 5,271 prototypes for the Dyson to find its way into existence. As he explained in a 2016 [interview](#) with The Guardian,

"By that point, though, I was heavily in debt and didn't know where to turn to bring my machine to the market. Then I received a call from a Japanese company, Apex. I got on a flight and, after several all-night meetings, signed a deal. In 1986, production of what we called G-force began. It looked quite different from the final Dyson design – [it was bright pink](#) – but it won a prize and was very successful in Japan. Twenty-two months later, we launched the DC01, the first Dyson vacuum cleaner. It was soon a bestseller."

Imagine if he had given up after 100, 1000, or 5,000 attempts. And would any of us have encouraged him to keep going?

There are countless examples of people who refused to allow perceived failure to be final. JK Rowling's Harry Potter manuscript was rejected twelve times before being accepted by an obscure London publisher. The Hunger Games, by Suzanne Collins, was turned down sixty times before finally landing a publisher.

What do they have in common? An unquenchable belief in their dream and the ability to put real and perceived failure in their rightful place.

Gratitude is another key component in developing a resilient character. Research has found that those people who can see the good or the potential for good in even dire situations develop traits that will help them in the future. These traits are protective.

So, how else can leaders develop a resilient character?

Surviving Setbacks

We seek safety by trying to avoid failure. But the truth is, we can't control everything, and that's the only way we'd be able to stay "safe" from failure. It's simply not possible. So what are our options?

Failure can develop us in ways that success cannot do if we let it. And it's not about sticking your head in the sand and pretending there isn't a problem. In the wrestle with disappointment, hurt, and failure, we often find a new and better way of doing things. I discuss this wrestle in my book [When Leaders Are Lost](#),

"The fallout is real. Some setbacks are relatively easy to recover from, while others significantly affect

our wellbeing as leaders, impacting our closest relationships in and outside work. We must never forget the flow-on effect from what happens to us, including how we respond to what occurs.

And after the initial fallout, how do we move on? Why do some move on with seeming ease, while for others, it becomes a burden that never goes away? How do you prepare yourself to experience setbacks in business or as a leader responsible for significant outcomes? How do you mitigate the emotional and physical toll and trust that the future can be bright, and your dreams re-engineered to achieve outcomes beyond your initial dreams?

While our experience of working and chasing our dreams may differ considerably from what we imagined, how do we keep sight of our goals and not give up on them when disappointment, failure, and hurt hit us head-on? How do we ensure our visceral reactions to events don't set us back further? How do we see to it these setbacks and our responses are only a detour, not a hard stop?

These are challenging questions and vitally important when considering how our working life and goals are linked to how we value ourselves and others. Our identity and sense of value often hang tenuously in the balance by the thread of success or failure.”¹

Maintaining your integrity

What happens when we fail as leaders? What happens when we make wrong choices, face demotion, or even lose jobs? It's during times when our decisions are questioned, our plans scrutinised, and outcomes criticised that we need to maintain our integrity.

This is where your core beliefs or value code can hold you in good stead regardless of the circumstances.

Whether you realise it or not, you have a value code that informs how you interact with the world around you. If you're unsure of your core beliefs and values, ask yourself where and with whom you spend your time and energy.

What you believe will always be expressed through your actions, and your actions matter. They make a difference for everyone around you. What you model for your organization will become part of the culture. If you believe that failure reflects who you are rather than what you've done, so will others.

It's time to flip the script on failure

So, you failed. It's a fact that we're all going to fail at some point, but that doesn't make it less painful. When our failure is at an organizational level, it has ramifications for the business—shareholders, staff, partners, customers, and vendors. When it's with those we hold dear, there are often consequences for

our relationships.

No one likes to fail. So many people fear failure because of the perceived cost to business, brand, and personal reputation. They blame shift and find excuses rather than own their mistakes.

But without failure, there is very little progress in the world. What happens if we own our failure, embrace the lessons learned, and use those lessons to propel ourselves and others forward?

As Elon Musk said, "Failure is an option here. If things are not failing, you are not innovating enough."



Leaders are in a privileged position. If they can lean into the lessons that only failure can impart, the benefits are far-reaching. If you can own failure and invite others into a solution-finding dialogue, you will change the culture of your organization. Give your teams permission to do the same and watch what happens.

Further reading on making failure your friend

For more on learning the lessons only failure can offer, grab a copy of my book [When Leaders Are Lost: Moving Beyond Disappointment, Failure, and Hurt to Redefine Success.](#)

References

- ¹ Williams, G. (2023) When Leaders Are Lost, Moving Beyond Disappointment, Failure, and Hurt to Redefine Success, 19.