

The Power of Failure

By Rob McKelvey

The Macquarie Dictionary defines fail as “to come short or be wanting in action, detail, or result; disappoint or prove lacking in what is attempted, expected, desired, or approved.” Wow!! That leaves a lot of scope to become a failure doesn’t it? Is a mistake a failure?

Many an up and coming and promising employee has been cut short in his or her tracks by being labelled a failure. In some organisational cultures a failure is the same as being branded a “loser”. And losers don’t go far. Some people are considered to have failed because they didn’t follow the letter of the process associated with the task. They may have achieved the desired outcome but failed in the process.

Being a “failure” can have a devastating impact on people if the organisation for which they work does not condone failure. It has the ability to lower the self esteem of individuals, make them not want to try anything new, even be fearful of expressing their opinions.

Yet we are surrounded by failure even from an early age. I have yet to see a child be successful at walking the first time they attempt it. Fortunately, parents are there to encourage the child to try again and again. How many people do you know who tied their shoes the first time? Or strung together intelligible words to make a sentence the first time they spoke. We give our children the positive opportunity to fail but treat failure as an adult negatively. As Steven Spielberg says, “Failure is inevitable. Success is elusive.”

What if we took the approach of Henry Ford who said, “Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently.” The opportunity to learn from our mistakes or failings is what allows us to grow and change as human beings. Take for example the following story. A candidate to replace the retiring president of a very successful company was being interviewed by the retiring president. The candidate, upon being introduced to the president, quickly said, “I would like to know what the keys to your success have been.” The older man looked at him for a moment and replied, “Young man, I can sum it up in two words: Good decisions.” To which the young man replied, “But how does one come to know which are the good decisions?” “One word, young man, experience.” replied the old man. “But how does one get experience?” asked the young executive. “Two words,” replied the retiring president, “Bad decisions.”

If you give people the freedom to succeed, you must also give them the freedom to fail. Through failure comes innovation and future success. Many good decisions from the past can actually turn into failures in the future. By relying on the way things used to be done, as a result of a good decision at the time, an organisation can leave themselves open to complacency and the threat of losing the competitive edge or, indeed their way.

There is a well known story about a habitual failure in the 1800’s in the United States. He failed in business in 1831. He ran for the legislature in 1832 and was defeated. He failed again in business in 1834. In 1838 he was defeated for house speaker. In 1843

was defeated for nomination for congress and lost the renomination in 1848. In 1849 he was rejected as a land officer. He was defeated in his attempt to be elected to the senate in 1854 and for nomination as vice president in 1856. He again failed in his attempt to be elected to the U.S. senate in 1858. But he kept trying and didn't give up. In 1860 he was elected President of the United States. His name is...Abraham Lincoln. I think Lincoln is a good example of not giving up and of learning from previous failures.

If we, as individuals and organisations, could allow an attitude to prevail that accepted failure as a learning experience rather than as a condemning descriptor, what a powerful environment we would have. People may feel encouraged to try again rather than give up. They could even try for the first time if the fear of failing was removed. Innovation could be put to the forefront. A never give up attitude may develop.

Think of where you would be if you gave up after you fell down the first time you tried to learn to walk.

Here is to learning the power of failure.