

Failure: A First Step Toward Discovery

by Jon Craighead

Failure is normally an uncomplimentary assessment of a person, place, or thing. Failure has many titles and few friends. There are numerous descriptions of failure: unsuccessful, defeat, fiasco, debacle, calamity, and devastation are some examples. The individual charged with failure is often described as a ne'er-do-well, untrustworthy, inadequate, flawed or negligent. Hardly anyone would choose these as an identity – yet we've all been there in some form or another. Attempting to reverse the morass of failure is a challenging and soul searching endeavor; it requires sorting through unconscious coincidences and unflattering realities. The most effective method to confront failure is to take full responsibility, sort through the facts, and begin a process for correction.

In her book Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility, renowned social scientist Ellen Langer provides great insights for those of us who find ourselves in failed situations. She suggests, "success is a *state of mind*, and so is failure; both are as varied as those who attempt to define each. Both require resonant leadership to overcome or succeed." It is heartening that there are reliably effective responses to this unacceptable and debilitating mindset. You can teach yourself to respond to failure, learn from others, or do both. In many ways, the pursuit of questions is a far more important beginning, verses searching for answers.

Bringing such an approach provides a pathway from self-victimization and inadequacy to responsibility and solution and the confidence to say how it will go. Failure is rarely a sudden occurrence; it is usually preceded by a trail of events that were either hurried, overlooked, or ignored. Dr. Langer suggests that opening our minds to what's possible instead of presuming an impossibility can lead to better health and happiness, resulting in competence and character in both life and business. Powerfully successful people anticipate happiness, health, and accomplishment and believe they can overcome difficulties. One's attitude to life has everything to do with one's vision of themselves, others, and the world.

Unreliable and incomplete work is often a source of failure. As an example, the principle intent of strategy is designing continuous sustainability. Assuming your current strategy was created in the past and under different circumstances, and that it is no longer producing the intended strategic results you planned, a potential source of this unintended outcome could be that you hadn't taken into account all available contingencies in the original planning process, resulting in an inadvertent and undesirable outcome. In this example, your incorrect factual assumptions are likely the very cause of your current failure.

When in a state of failure, it is unwise to attempt to resolve the situation alone. Alignment with trusted partners provides a consistency of shared commitments, values and skills to redirect a situation from failure to success. It helps one to stay focused on recovery as opposed to failure. Successfully working together with talented contemporaries significantly increases the percentage of successful learning that will likely insure success going forward. This is distinct from “group think” which stifles input and creativity. Misalignment is antithetical to teamwork and workability. Alignment is a positive sourceful approach that offers increased levels of skills, shared commitments, and comradery.

It has been said by scholars that we are what we think. They suggest that our imagination has a way of making our thinking a reality. Applying this premise encourages us to consciously monitor our thinking and utilize this process to make the biggest contribution to ourselves and others for the greater good. The legendary Peter Drucker in his great wisdom asserted that “sound ideas across management divisions beyond traditional thinking provide insights of enduring value. Our ability to imagine and assess and resolve problematic situations is more valuable than the most sophisticated machines available to mankind.” Our greatest discoveries and inventions often begin with failure that resulted in unimagined breakthroughs. One could construe that our failures are a precursor to our greatest successes.

Rather than relating to failure as an intolerable condition, one could conceptualize that each failure is an unassailable rite of passage to initiate our next success. As industrialist Henry Ford suggested: “Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently.” Our failures could be a platform for our greatest productivity.