

SmartBlog on Leadership

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Failure as a pathway to success

By [Joel Garfinkle](#) on November 18th, 2013 |

From Henry Ford to Steve Jobs, prominent business leaders have touted the virtues of failure as a pathway to ultimate success. Why? Failure provides a laboratory for learning if it's done in a safe environment.

Often, it's a matter of **perception**. Falling short of a goal could be interpreted as failure. Or it could be seen as an opportunity to create and reach an entirely different goal.

Take, for example, the story of the Post-It Note, invented quite by accident by Spencer Silver and Art Fry, two colleagues at 3M. Silver had been working on a new kind of adhesive for the company but had failed at producing what he wanted because it wasn't sticky enough. Fry heard about Silver's failures in a company seminar. Fry, a singer in a church choir, was looking for some way to mark his music scores with a bookmark that wouldn't fall out but wasn't so sticky that it damaged the pages. Turns out that Silver's "failed" adhesive was just sticky enough and the Post-It Note was born.

So how do you, as a boss, react when one of your employees makes a mistake, blows an assignment, or just out and out fails at something? Let's hope you renounced foot-stomping and temper tantrums when you left the playground. Instead, here are three more productive reactions you can have when one of your employees doesn't meet your expectations.

1. Fix it and move on
2. Share your story
3. Reward, don't punish

Different kinds of failures demand different reactions, of course. You can adapt and use whatever response is appropriate to your particular situation. Just make sure to provide **quality feedback to your employees**.

Fix it and move on. It's a competitive world out there and if you want to succeed, you may sometimes need to prioritize speed over perfection. Making mistakes is a necessary byproduct of a highly productive workplace. Let your people know that mistakes will be accepted, and that they may even be critical to success. If mistakes are made in good faith, not repeated and fixed promptly, then go for it.

Let's say, for example, that your team is responsible for creating a dynamite presentation of your company's skills, designed to land the biggest client you've ever had. Five minutes before you're ready to enter the spotlight, you discover that the last section of your visuals has vanished from your laptop. Instead of blame and panic, get creative. Use a whiteboard, go for some audience participation, do whatever it takes. Get the job done and clean up the internal breakdown later.

Share your story. Nothing humanizes a boss more than being vulnerable with the team. Your people need to know that not only are they free to fail, you have failed before them — and you probably will again. Let's say, for example, that you're debriefing the screw-up outlined in No. 1, above. Instead of beating up on the poor person who didn't download the right presentation, share your horror story of a presentation gone wrong. Scott Adams, creator of the ever-popular "Dilbert" comic, **has a book of shared failures** — everything from bad stock buys to ridiculously silly inventions. Moral of the story: you'll never succeed unless you fail first.

Reward, don't punish. There is no reward without risk, and no one is going to take a risk if they fear retribution for their failures. **Reward the employees** who get the most useful work done, not the ones who make the fewest mistakes. The least motivating strategy you can adopt is to keep a catalog of employee missteps that you recite in detail during your annual performance reviews. Instead, convince your people that the occasional blunder is worth it and will be applauded rather than condemned.

Ready? Let's go out and make a few mistakes.

Have you experienced a failure that you turned into a success? If so, what was the situation? If you're a boss and have an employee who makes a mistake, how do you respond? Share your thoughts and stories in the comments section below.

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