

### Feeling Comfortable with Failing

We have all experienced the frustration and sometimes embarrassment of failing. What happens after? We often abandon the effort personally and on an organizational level; we tell others, "we tried that before, and it didn't work" (even if the attempt was made years—or decades—ago).

The personal and professional stigma attached to failure continues to be a significant barrier to innovation, often hindering what we try in fear of not getting it right. If we want to achieve different outcomes, we must try new ways of doing things and accept that some of our ideas won't work. We need to change our mindset.

The key to trying something new is to get more comfortable with failure. We can practice the following tips.

1. Minimize big failures by creating small tasks that allow you to fail in small ways. For example, if your goal is to write every day, start by committing to one short paragraph. If you don't like what you write, no big deal! It's just a paragraph. Write another one tomorrow. Or, if your goal is to implement a new work schedule that allows your employees more flexibility, you can test it for a set amount of time before normalizing it. The names testing period allows you to adjust easily.
2. Keep in mind the adage of "try, try, again." And then try it again, albeit with corrections to increase the likelihood of success. We have heard that Aha! moments come naturally to talented, creative people; this is seldom true. More often, 'Lightbulb moments' arrive after many failed experiments.
3. Make conscious efforts to detach egos, emotions, and a sense of personal worth from our projects and attempts. That mindset allows us to rephrase "I failed" to "the idea/concept/model failed." We can hold our ideas lightly and allow them to change, evolve, or be abandoned when they don't work.
4. Share your goal with others before self-doubt creeps in. This layer of accountability will help us to follow through on our goal — no matter how bad we were the first time.
5. Maintain a log of your efforts. You will notice over time how much progress you have made. Instead of focusing on the bumps in the road, you will appreciate how far you are from your starting point and how much closer you are to the destination of success.

And finally,

6. Support others when they fail. A culture where failure is not accepted can lead to hiding the truth, anxiety, and missed learning opportunities. Teams and organizations need to embrace the possibility of failure and support individuals to share what they learn along the journey to success.

A reflective exercise:

1. Think of and write about when you felt like you failed at something. For example, perhaps you couldn't hand in a report on time.
2. Ask yourself why you thought you failed. For example, perhaps you didn't have enough time to complete the report or weren't clear about what was being asked of you.
3. Go deeper into the real reason behind your failure. One way to do this is to ask yourself 'why?' several times to uncover the underlying root cause.
4. What would you do differently next time? Sometimes failure happens beyond our immediate control and despite our best preparation. If this is the case, what steps might you take to avoid a similar situation in the future, or who might you need to connect with to address the bigger challenges?

Reflecting helps us deconstruct failures so that we can act earlier to get a better result in future scenarios. Talking about them with colleagues de-stigmatizes failure, too, supporting us to see our failures as necessary learning experiences that lead to improvement.

References:

HBR Management Tip of the Day, January 24, 2022

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