



Failure: The Ultimate Secret of Success

By **Randall Munson**

Your success may depend on something startling – your failure. That’s right, willingness to fail can be essential to success. Not very intuitive, right? Our formal education teaches just the opposite.

An “A” is good; an “F” is bad. If you get lots of “A”s and no “F”s, you are a successful student. But that lesson doesn’t necessarily carry over to business. Our unwillingness to fail undermines our opportunity to innovate.

Thomas Edison is considered the inventor of the practical incandescent light bulb. He didn’t get it right the first time. Or the second, third, or fourth. In fact, it’s believed he tried to invent the light bulb roughly 1800 times. When asked, “What’s it like to have failed so often?”, he replied, “I didn’t fail – I invented the light bulb.” He knew failure was necessary to the process. In his words, “ I failed my way to success.”

A well known business expert recommended “The way to succeed is to double your failure rate.” His name was Thomas J. Watson Sr., the founder of IBM. Understanding that his probability of success increased with his failures, he, too, failed his way to success.

Do you follow this philosophy, embracing failure as a means to greater success? You naturally reward employees or fellow team members for success. But if you want to keep them satisfied or keep them period, let them fail.

Let team members try new things that have a *possibility*, not a guarantee, of success; and whether they succeed or fail, reward them. Encourage their risk-taking. If they are punished for every failure, they will begin to suppress their imagination. As a result, you’ll get the same old stuff that works fairly well. But if you are willing to share the risk, it frees your team members to try new creative approaches and processes. You’ll tap into a fresh well of creative ideas,

dramatically increasing your potential for a breakthrough.

An executive with Hewlett-Packard told me how closely they track their failure rates in their printer development lab. If the failure rate gets too low, they get concerned and take corrective action. That is, they realize that if they aren’t failing enough, they aren’t trying hard enough. They aren’t creating the opening for those breakthrough ideas that are critical to success in a highly competitive field.

Leadership expert Peter Drucker says, “ The better a man is, the more mistakes he will make, for the more new things he will try. I would never promote to a top-level job a man who was not making mistakes ... otherwise he is sure to be mediocre.”

On a baseball team the player who holds the record for home runs usually holds the record for another statistic – strikeouts. He’s willing to fail more than anyone else, stepping up to the plate to swing three times and then sitting down in humiliation. But the team keeps him because once in a while that player blasts the ball over the fence and scores the big run. Baseball legend Babe Ruth put it this way: “Every strike brings me closer to the next home run.”

According to Tulane University business professor Lisa Amos, entrepreneurs average 3.8 failures before they finally succeed in business. The average millionaire goes bankrupt three times. That’s a level of failure most of us try very hard to avoid. Yet that willingness to fail frees the truly successful to achieve their greatest goals. Fear of failure is paralyzing. But when we give ourselves permission to fail, we also give ourselves permission to succeed. As hockey star Wayne Gretski said, “You miss 100% of the shots you never take.”

Embrace the inevitable: you are going to make mistakes. Sure, you’ve heard the saying “practice makes perfect.” But think about it. If you practice, will it

make you perfect? At best, practice makes improvement. But practice won’t make you perfect. You will never be perfect. Get over it. It’s impossible for you, your team, and your business to achieve perfection. By devoting yourself to achieving the impossible, perfection, you limit your opportunity to attain the possible. When you’re willing to take calculated risks and accept the failures that are part of the process, you gain the opportunity to make dramatic advances.

Does a willingness to fail give you the excuse to deliver failing products or services? Of course not. As I discussed recently in an address at the US Department of Labor’s Excellence Conference, today’s quality conscious market demands excellence. But you can take a calculated risk while developing something new, then subject it to rigorous scrutiny. If it fails, fine. Learn what you can from the failure and try something else. If it succeeds you have gained an advantage over competitors who were trying to avoid failure.

So go for it. Push yourself. Try something creative, realizing you may fail. Your failure won’t make **you** a failure. And it may just make you a success.

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