



**PERSONAL
(SELF)
LEADERSHIP**

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1. The 60 Second Leader and ...

FAILURE

Forgive and remember. When Jack blew up the plant. The Tripping Point.

ARNIE ON FAILURE

'If you fail, try, try again.

Then bring in the stunt double.'

Arnold Schwarzenegger, quoted in *Vanity Fair*

You probably don't think of yourself as a failure. But, you or so-called 'leaders' in your organization may find it a useful label to hang on others. Allocating blame when things go wrong is a long-standing convention for maintaining the myth of leader infallibility. It poisons your culture, as those below will follow the lead. Using the authority of position to cascade blame becomes the norm.

The best leaders adopt a different perspective on failure, encouraging a *forgive and remember* culture. Firstly, you separate failure from the person – it's an occurrence, not an inherent trait.* Secondly, you make it clear some failures are a desirable outcome of trying new things. Thirdly, you set in place practices for limiting damage when failure occurs and for capturing and sharing learning.

This last – sharing learning to prevent repetition of mistakes – is where most organizations still fail.

*The caveat is, of course, that even with the best recruitment methods you can end up with someone who repeats mistakes or just makes too many and has to be moved or leave.



The road to wisdom?

Well, it's plain and simple to express:

Err

and err

and err again

but less

and less

and less

Piet Hein, Danish inventor and poet

Here's Jack Welch, the legendary CEO of General Electric, illustrating the importance of leaders tolerating failure, with an episode from his own past:

Kirsty Wark: I understand one of the first things you did at GE was blow up the plant you were working in and that it had a profound effect on you. Can you explain?

Jack Welch: I did accidentally blow up the plant, yes. I was about 25 and had been experimenting with a different mixture. There was an explosion. I was scared stiff when I went to the manager. But, he was mainly curious as to why I had done what I had done and what I had learnt from it. 'Would the process I was trying have worked?' is what interested him! That real encouragement to get it right rather than a punishment did have a profound effect on me, yes. ⁽¹⁾

Admit it: you would have fired him.

LIMITING THE DAMAGE OF FAILURE

Use pilots to limit the damage when trying new ways of working. The three principles of successful pilots are: think big; start small; scale fast.



MECHANISM FOR SPREADING LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Jack Welch again:

'We celebrated mistakes at a management gathering with 1,000 people in the room. A manager would get up and say why the environmentally sensitive light bulb or whatever it was had failed ... then we'd give them \$1,000 or a TV or something, depending on the scale of the thing. The point was to share the learning and get smarter as an organization.'⁽¹⁾

ON THE OTHER HAND ...

You will hear again and again in leadership development circles the mantra 'learn from mistakes and failures'. But, in among the din of all that noisy received wisdom, I recently heard one voice point out that there is an uber-message about failure; a message that is more important than 'learn from your mistakes'. I heard **Bob Geldof** say this at the end of 2006:

'The Bob Dylan line always appealed to me. "There's no success like failure and failure is no success at all." It was a while before I understood it. Leaders need the ability to fail and then get up and go on. It doesn't matter if you don't learn from the failure. But it does matter that you get up and get on.'

USEFUL CONCEPT

The Tripping Point:⁽¹⁾ Refers to those moments in life where you land on your backside and suddenly realize, with blinding clarity, that you got it wrong. For great leaders at all levels in an organization, these are significant illumination points in life. The shock of failure sears into you, you learn, change and, as Geldof says above, get up and move on. And you show other people by your own example how to do it.

AND, FINALLY ... WHO'S THIS FAILURE?

(Thank you to Professor Aidan Halligan for sharing this with me):

1831 Failed in business

1832 Defeated for congress

1834 Failed in business

1835 Sweetheart died



1836 Had nervous breakdown

1838 Defeated for Congress

1843 Defeated for Congress

1846 Defeated for Congress

1848 Defeated for Congress

1855 Defeated for US Senate

1856 Defeated for Vice-President

1858 Defeated for US Senate

1860 Elected sixteenth President of the USA

Clue: Tall chap. Beard. Probably shouldn't have gone to the theatre. One of the most revered US Presidents in history.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- (1) Keynote interview, *European Conference on Customer Management*, London, 2004, organized by www.ecsw.com. The excerpts here are from my shorthand notes.
- (2) I know, I wish I'd thought of it, too. But, I spotted the phrase 'The Tripping Point' in the book *Success Built to Last: Creating a Life That Matters*, Jerry Porras' follow-up to *Built To Last*.

Worth reading: *Why CEOs Fail*, David Dotlich, Peter Cairo *et al*. Eleven reasons leaders fail. Not just for CEOs, despite the title. My favourite is Number 4: '*Excessive Caution: The next decision you make may be your first ...*'



A 60 Second Leader Tale: Leading by example

'Example is all in a leader. That's all leadership is.'

Aidan Halligan

Here's a true leader tale from Captain D. Michael Abrashoff, who turned around a poor-performing ship, USS *Benfold*, to make it, according to a number of measures, 'the best damn ship in the Navy'. That phrase became the strap line that Benfold sailors used to describe their own ship

'On Sunday afternoons, we had cookouts on the aft flight deck. One Sunday early in my command, I went back to observe. A long line of sailors stood waiting to get their lunch. My officers would cut to the head of the line to get their food, and then go up to the next deck to eat by themselves. The officers weren't bad people; they just didn't know any different. It's always been that way.

When I saw this, I decided to go to the end of the line. The officers were looking down, curious. They elected the supply officer to come talk to me.

"Captain," he said, looking worried, "you don't understand. You go to the head of the line."

"That's okay," I said ...

I stood in line and got my food. Then I stayed on the lower deck and ate with the sailors. The officers became totally alert. You could almost hear the gears shifting in their heads.

The next weekend we had another cookout and, **without my saying a word to anyone** [*author's note: my emphasis*], the officers went to the end of the line. When they got their lunch, they stayed on the lower level and mingled with the sailors.



Given the Navy's basically classist society, to say that the fraternal scene on the flight deck was unusual would be an understatement. To me, it felt right ...

As Captain I was charged with enforcing 225 years of accumulated Navy regulations, policies, and procedures. But every last one was up for negotiation whenever my people came up with better ways of doing things. To facilitate that I had to encourage the crew to take initiative – and make sure the officers welcomed it. And that meant they would have to get to know one another as people. They would have to respect one another, and from that would come trust.'

Source: *It's Your Ship: Management techniques from the best damn ship in the Navy*, by Captain D. Michael Abrashoff, an instinctive, largely self-taught leader. This book is packed full of practical lessons for challenging hierarchy and improving performance through inspired leadership.

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