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REDEFINING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Each human being is born with an innate desire for respect. Beyond the base Maslovian hierarchy, the most pressing human goal is to be of import—that is, to be important.

The drive to matter has itself been a dark topic that invisibly binds all social organization, from the quiet plains of outer Mongolia to the teeming London streets, from the earliest bands of hunter-gatherers to the most modern empires and megacorporations.

This drive for importance is today commonly called leadership. It is the singular genius of the human species to look at alpha roles across the animal kingdom and mold the collected

facts and intuitions into a sophisticated and ever-evolving art of moving others in new directions. Of course, the ability to move others in new directions isn't solely a practical concern: It is a piece of our inner drive to matter, to be of value and significance.

Thus, the curtest expression of humanity's notion of true success may be this: To do something that matters so that we might know that *we* matter. Put differently, to make something worthy happen, and, in the process, to enhance our own name.

But just as passionately as humans everywhere seek success, we instinctively seek to avoid even the faintest trace of failure.

"If at first you don't succeed, destroy all evidence that you tried," one humorist quipped. Indeed, whole industries—public relations, advertising, and the legal profession among them—strive to destroy the evidence and to clear the scents and stains of failure from our individual and corporate names.

The difference between being a cause of a failure and being a failure is too subtle for most people's comfort. In their calculations, they must avoid failure at any cost.

But what if failure is inextricably a part of the DNA of even the most successful people—of organizations, presidents, chief executive officers (CEOs), and celebrities?

In recent years, failure has undergone something of a public relations makeover of its own: For a rare time in history, theorists and practitioners of leadership confess to the practical value of failure along the path to success. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs boast of how they embrace failure and wear their past failures as badges of honor.

However, neither the person who flees from any risk of failure nor the person who glorifies it does it proper justice.

Although so many management experts and self-help gurus today speak excitedly of the value of failure, we feel some honesty is in order: Many failures are fatal.

LEADERSHIP AS PLAYING WITH FIRE—THE VERY FIRE OF THE GODS

Although the leader should learn some of the playful, inventive spirit of a Thomas Edison, one should always be mindful of the difference between playing with building blocks and playing with matches. Although failure can create a new path, no one should speak glibly of the destruction that it may entail.

Humanity has been ambivalent about fire since its earliest days. Failure should be viewed in the same cautionary light.

In various myths and legends, the gods see fire as something humanity is unworthy of, or incapable of handling. Like the god Vulcan's fires, failure is capable of causing both great benefit and final destruction.

The Romans hailed Vulcan as a blacksmith and craftsman who could coax fire and steel into producing beautiful things. They simultaneously dreaded the withering blaze of fire that might lay all they loved to waste. It was not by accident that the

temples of Vulcan, and their attendant bonfire sacrifices, were placed outside major population centers.

Failure may also be identified with the eminent god Shiva of Indian tradition, whose cosmic dance brings both destruction and renewal. Shiva, fittingly, is associated closely with Agni, the Hindu and Buddhist god of fire. (And Agni, in a fittingly terrifying fashion, was the name given to India's first long-range nuclear weapon.)

A willingness to fail can be liberating, and a fear of failing calamitous. We can think of countless coaches or leaders who had a great many assets working in their favor, but who, in playing not to lose, unwittingly opened the door for doubt, timidity, and, ultimately, failure.

Fortune or luck plays the greatest role in any leader's career, Machiavelli argued. Yet he did not portray fortune as something to be accepted meekly and passively. Rather, he considered it something that the leader must be audacious enough to push and cajole. This is in sharp contrast to the excessive caution that we see among most contemporary managers.

At the same time, we want to be stone-cold sober about the matter: Falling a short distance may allow us to try again tomorrow. Falling a great distance will not.

> ### mulligan (muhl-ih-guhn)
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> In golf, a shot that is repeated without penalty. Often permitted in informal competition.

However, we must recognize that mulligans are rare in most aspects of professional life. A pilot has only one chance to land himself and his passengers correctly. No sane patient wants to be placed under the blade of a surgeon who thinks, "If I fail today, I'll learn something for the next case." No reasonable investor sinks savings into a new enterprise whose managers are content to experiment casually in a way that increases the chance of bankruptcy.

As the old advertising adage attributed to John Wanamaker goes, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." In the same way, no one knows with certainty which failures are likely to be inevitable, which are likely to be beneficial, and which will destroy you. The leader must recognize, though, that not all failures are equal—and not all are equally surmountable.

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Of course, one of our major goals is to tamp down the anxieties of the leader or entrepreneur who suspects that any risk taking might be fatal—because risk taking and setbacks are necessary for most all leaders. And if we took the threads that make up the typical successful leader, those threads would contain a far greater amount of failure than we realize. In fact, they contain more failure than success. We can liken it to how even an excellent hitter in baseball fails to get on base the vast majority of the time.

Although we have the popular notion of the Paul Bunyan–like hero who pushes or cajoles Destiny in new directions, the

subtler reality is twofold: First, the successes of the so-called hero depend more on other people's actions than we commonly realize. Second, the hero is less potent than the common iconographies suggest.

Leadership, thus, is best seen as a mysterious and oftentimes unquantifiable thing, rather than a science, social science, or any sort of formulaic craft. This is why Bennis and Sample titled the leadership seminar that we cotaught for 16 years "The Art and Adventure of Leadership."

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Many scholars and pundits have offered an anatomy of a particular failure in some realm of history or business. We propose here to explore the anatomy of failure itself.

Leaders will mature as they are able to look, without flinching, into the dark abyss of failure. Crucially, they must see that the abyss is more than a general darkness. It is a variegated world that they must understand at a deep level.

In fact, success and failure within leadership involve some paradoxical but eye-opening realities:

- In leadership, most everything is situational and contingent. There are no easy answers or formulas. The contingency principle demonstrates, repeatedly through history, that what works in one context at one time won't necessarily work in a different context or even in the same context at a different time.

- We can attribute the greatest part of a leader's success to forces outside his or her control—to inscrutable fortune. Above all, the leader must be lucky, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote in his sixteenth-century book, *The Prince*.[1] Yet often there are ways to make one's luck that often involve how one manages one's failures.

- Some institutions or people can fail so often that they do more harm than good most of the time—yet, on average, do more good than harm. Or the reverse can be true. So the legacy of a person who has failures in his or her past is a complex one.

IT *DEPENDS*: THE CONTINGENCY PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

American society appropriately reveres George Washington. In fact, if more Americans properly understood his role in the shaping of the modern democratic experiment, he would be even more deeply appreciated. Yet, bearing in mind the contingency principle, we are also certain that being Washington, or being like Washington, is not a universally applicable recipe for success in leadership. Washington was the person for his time and his duty—not necessarily for any other time or duty.

Take, too, the case of the late Steve Jobs. No modern management figure is as envied and admired. Yet Jobs's

controversial style would fail spectacularly if he had presided over a more collaborative or less authoritarian work environment than Apple during his tenure. Leaders have gone into university presidencies promising to be "agents of disruption and change," in the Jobs mold—and have typically been removed in short order. It isn't enough to say that they lacked Jobs's mettle or brilliance; Jobs himself would have been spat out quickly by a tenured university faculty, which is completely empowered to resist a CEO's directives with impunity.

Pacifistic Mahatma Gandhi is an icon of another sort, in stark contrast to the fire-breathing Jobs. Gandhi is rightly viewed as a hero for peacefully seeking Indian independence from Britain. But whereas Gandhi was able to push back against the British empire and gradually earn international sympathy through media-savvy forms of passive resistance, that approach would have been dispatched quickly by a ruthless Nazi German regime that tightly controlled media.

Thus it is impossible to say that Gandhi's passive way, Jobs's mercurial way, or Washington's measured way is the right way on the path to success. If a person is truly a great leader, he or she in all likelihood is capable of recognizing the situational and contingent aspects of leadership, adjusting as necessary to accomplish his or her goals.

It was the great psychologist Abraham Maslow who observed, "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you

have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."[2] Winston Churchill was, at base, a human hammer.

In some situations, Churchill's approach caused problems and discredited him. In one great context, however, a nation and a world that had once dismissed the Churchillian hammer would come to revere it.

The fact is that failure is never good in and of itself. Although management gurus and technology entrepreneurs speak of embracing failure and celebrating failure, we would argue that the leader should not embrace or celebrate failure. He or she should instead embrace resiliency and adaptability— which can come in the wake of failure.

Only in that sense does failure indirectly have something to offer. Only in that way can it be any kind of meaningful classroom for wisdom, laboratory for innovation, or matrix for change.

Three pyramids in Giza were built as markers of the deeds of Egypt's pharaohs. And for nearly four millennia, they stood as the tallest manmade structures on Earth. Yet given that pharaohs offer less allure in our own time, the pyramids now serve mainly as eternal symbols of the desperate human desire to be remembered.

Leaders build monuments and statues to illustrate and promote their impact. Those edifices invariably suggest infallibility within the popular imagination. Far less often do we see any attempt to represent, in perpetuity, the fallibility of leaders. This is unfortunate.

There is a difference between transitory failure and final failure. The first is inevitable, but if the first is properly managed, the second, more permanent kind of failure doesn't have to be.

WHY WE MUST VIEW LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF COMPLEXITY

Any intellectually honest treatment of failure requires a knack for navigating complexity, and taking a many-layered approach. We know that our times are not naturally tilted toward serious consideration of complexity, uncertainty, and paradox—yet good leadership demands it.

Though we now struggle to stay afloat in immense, roiling seas of information, the temptation is too often to rush toward overly simple, one-size-fits-all answers. Perhaps it is because of the anxiety of being adrift in such raging seas that we confuse such easy answers with lifelines. But they are not.

E. B. White wrote an essay in the *New Yorker* decades ago titled "There's a Bright Future for Complexity." Its concluding words were, "There's a bright future for complexity, what with one thing always leading to another."[3]

Granted, that future has not arrived for society on the whole. But those are still words to guide the mature leader.

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At the same time the leader must appreciate Oliver Wendell Holmes's admonition to find the simplicity "on the other side" of complexity. The leader must go both beyond the reductionist formulas and the potential paralysis that comes from complexity.

There's the rub. The leader must be fluent in both simplicity and complexity. In day-to-day business, he or she will use the latter to make the most important decisions and the former to communicate them to those he or she leads.

In the ancient Greek legend, the Three Fates spun the threads of life that determined the destinies of humans and in some accounts even of the gods. Mature leaders understand that these threads bind success and failure in an inextricable fashion. They must know in their heart their own answer to certain questions:

- In what circumstances can I afford to fail, and to what extent?

- In which circumstances should I proactively take risks and experiment so aggressively that failure is inevitable?

- In which circumstances must I seek never to fail, lest I risk fatally compromising my legacy or my organization?

Many talented and smart people have stumbled in an important venture—sometimes repeatedly. Such failures may owe to bad luck, insufficient resources, or a lack of command of technique.

Some never recover from the loss. Yet others recover in profound ways—much like the monomythic hero of various ancient legends who goes on to reinvent himself and achieve a higher and more redemptive form of greatness than if he had succeeded in his initial venture.

These latter people are what we consider products of life's crucibles: They are tested and refined by the searing heat of circumstance.

Failures of character may be the most pernicious form of failure. Such experiences can have a dramatic and sometimes irreversible impact on the leader and those he or she leads. Like yeast or cancer, it spreads in ways that can compromise large organizations and entire societies.

There is a spectrum regarding failure: Failures involving mistakes and wrong guesses are oftentimes redeemable, especially when they involve a large number of low-stakes experiments.

This is what Edison had in mind when he quipped, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." This is the notion of failure as an invigorating, playful, childlike activity. It strips the shame from failure and reframes it as a wonderful and serendipitous path along the way to innovation.

In this way, many successful leaders have made peace with momentary failure by reframing it. Many of the leaders Bennis has studied and interviewed over the decades did not even use the F-word in their daily lives. Rather, they spoke casually of false starts, bloopers, losses, misses, foul-ups, stumbles, botches, bungles . . . but not failures.

When these leaders so recast momentary failure in their lives, they were able to defang it, to eliminate its harsher connotations, and even to make it their teacher.

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Stumbles and acts of incompetence are sometimes redeemable. However, the chances of redemption are lowest when it comes to failures of *character*—that is, unless the process develops deeper and greater character in the leader. Without that, new efforts redoubled would just result in similar or even greater setbacks.

Redemption is not always an option. Consider the words of a bitter and defeated Terry Malloy (portrayed by Marlon Brando) in 1954's *On the Waterfront,* a film based on news accounts of corruption on Northeastern docks. When his brother (and mob aide) Charley suggests that Terry's manager derailed his promising boxing career, Terry responds that Charley, not his manager, did that by talking him out of boxing a certain opponent, yet it was Charley himself who ruined his career by cajoling Terry, against his own better judgment, to take a dive in a key fight.

Terry gains perhaps a measure of redemption at the end of the film, after he nearly loses his life to violence. But in a later novelization of the film that reflected the original, darker ending of the screenplay, there is no redemption, no simple vindication of simple principles. Terry is murdered.

In some cases, failures of character result in a promising career exploding on the launching pad. In other cases, they

result in a mighty career crashing ignobly at the end. It has been said that a dictator looks wonderful until the last 10 minutes. Indeed, failures of character, and their consequences, reveal themselves most noticeably toward the final moments of a flawed leader's career, when the possibility for redemption has passed.

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Most failures are a communal affair. Some are particularly collective in nature, in that they are caused in large part by a shared dysfunction. Groupthink is the most obvious example.

Historian Barbara W. Tuchman's 1984 *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* illustrates how groups of leaders can collaborate to pursue policies that are diametrically opposed to their institutions' self-interests. Tuchman has discussed how events such as the legendary sack of Troy, the unresponsiveness of Renaissance popes to criticism, England's mishandling of its rebellious American colonies, and the United States' intervention in Vietnam were all group decisions that led to failure—even though better alternatives were known to exist at the time of decision.

The embers of World War II animated a new generation of scholars, who sought to understand better the dynamics of human organizations and societies. This would lead to the birth of modern management and leadership studies.

A then-youthful Bennis and other young scholars at organizations such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology gathered urgently to study the factors that could lead

competent organizations and societies to embrace madmen and totalitarianism. They argued that if we could understand such dynamics, we could hope to manage and manipulate the dynamics, both to prevent the worst and to encourage the best.

Bennis and his fellow scholars came to some simple and key conclusions, which more than a half century later are still being unpacked and processed. One was that a democratic approach within an organization or society was generally more beneficial, adaptable, and durable than an authoritarian, top-down one. This applied as much to companies as to countries. This conclusion led, correctly, to Bennis's prediction that the United States could prevail over the Soviet Union without a thermonuclear explosion taking place.

The other conclusion, however, was that the benefits of the democratic process could easily be thwarted by more pernicious aspects of group dynamics. This includes collective cognitive biases, groupthink, and other phenomena. (These mixed conclusions will be discussed in detail later in Chapter 4 of this book.)

How Failure Turned George Washington from a Redcoat into the World's Most Successful Traitor

George Washington came of age with ambitions of greater scope than the means and stature of his family would allow. His ambition and boldness defined his life through young adulthood. Yet his ability to later curb

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that ambition and boldness is what allowed him to become the living soul of modern democracy.

Washington was only 11 when his father died. The passing meant he would be in no position to go to England to receive the quality schooling that his older siblings had. His older half-brother Lawrence mentored him, but he, too, died by the time Washington reached young adulthood. Still, the ambitious Washington was able to open doors for himself, especially by connecting with the distinguished and wealthy Fairfax family.

Bridled Ambition: The Development of the Nation's Father

Washington's earliest military expeditions, on behalf of England's colonial army, demonstrated boldness, audacity, and callowness in equal measures. After his first taste of combat, he would write to his younger brother John, "I heard the bullets whistle, and, believe me, there is something charming in the sound."[4]

Washington was at the center of a reckless and disastrous military venture near Pittsburgh in 1754. He was captured by the French and then released in ignominy. Some believed his battlefield brashness helped trigger full-blown war between the French and British.

A chagrined Washington would later volunteer to serve General Edward Braddock of the British army the following year. When Braddock died in a French–Indian ambush, the once overly feisty Washington organized a skillful retreat. It was the first time that he would earn acclaim for restraint rather than boldness. And such restraint became a template for his future successes.

If Washington had succeeded early in his career, he may well have earned a full commission in the British army. In other words, he would have become fully invested in the cause that he would later oppose. So the majestic trajectory of his life required failure early on.

Washington's still-robust ambition led him to marry a well-heeled widow, Martha Dandridge Custis (though his heart may have belonged to Sally Fairfax). The marriage allowed him instantly to become a successful businessperson, to hold considerable standing in Virginia society, and even to dabble in politics. His increasing irritation at the lack of British respect for the interests and rights of the colonies began to reshape his loyalties; when revolution was at hand, Washington emerged as the best choice for commander of the rebel forces.

Washington's increased tolerance for caution served him magnificently in the early portions of the

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American Revolution. He knew his forces lacked the training or resources to face the British head-on. He mastered the art of "strategic retreats," of cautious and defensive approaches. The once-audacious warrior now recognized that, as historians have noted, his job was less to win the war than to keep his troops out of position to lose it.

Consider the irony: He became now the chief traitor to his former cause, in part because of events set in motion by an early failure on behalf of that cause. But now, while leading the rebels, his main job was to avoid final failure at all costs!

In the context of the contingency principle, it should be noted that Washington's caution shouldn't be a template for every leader in every situation. It worked particularly well for Washington because his side was so thoroughly outmanned; hence, a war of attrition was his only plausible approach.

Still he did, at opportune moments, move aggressively and use the element of surprise—never more memorably than on the freezing Christmas night of 1776, when Washington's troops ambushed unsuspecting Hessian troops who reasonably expected that his troops would have retired for the time being.

Just as Washington curbed his boldness, he came to restrain his ambition. His victories in the war of

independence assured him of unlimited powers that a younger Washington would have craved.

The more mature Washington would do something unexpected—not only by the standards of the person he once was but also by the standards of almost any historical leader. He became "the American Cincinnatus," historian Garry Wills observed in *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment.* The Roman leader Cincinnatus on two separate occasions enjoyed full dictatorial power during times of crisis; both times, he handed back the fasces of power and returned to his farm.

And twice Washington passed up chances to be a quasidictator for life, once following the war and again following his second term as president.

Quite possibly modern democracy never would have taken root if not for Washington's restraint. Indeed, democracy has failed in many nations that have attempted it, largely because their leaders had ambitions that were more like those of the young Washington than those of the mature Washington.

Though the city of Cincinnati is named in the Roman leader's honor, it is appropriate to remember that there has rarely been a notable market for Cincinnatus-type figures.

Few people today clamor for a Cincinnatus, even in emerging nations that could desperately utilize such a

person to guide them through a democratic spring. Too many are more likely to hail a Caesar, to pledge lifelong support to a heroic, larger-than-life figure.

Washington endured several crucial shaping experiences but perhaps none as pivotal as the duress of his earliest major expedition. We consider such experiences crucibles of leadership.