



The Politics of Hope Newsletter

*“Helping Ordinary Citizens Become
Extraordinary Public Leaders”*



Is Failure Good for You?

By Donna Zajonc
December 2008

A professional baseball player is a huge success if they have a .300 batting average. That means they fail 70% of the time! J.K. Rowling, author of the wildly successful Harry Potter series was a divorced, single mom and all but homeless before she discovered writing fiction was her passion.

Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team the first time he tried out and Winston Churchill flunked the sixth grade. Abraham Lincoln ran for office 22 times before he was elected to Congress.

Was failure good for these leaders? The best book I know on this subject is entitled *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success* (2007) by Stanford psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck. (It is written for the general public so it is easy to read.) Dweck began her work by studying intelligence and gradually observed that intelligence is less the key to success than the mindset one brings to any challenge.

She observed that there are two basic mindsets about how people deal with failure. The person with a “fixed” mindset believes that they have a finite ability. They tend to focus on learning a particular skill or task and strive to do it very well. Their fear of trying new things is that they may look stupid or incompetent.

Working hard and excelling in order to find the right success formula is important to those with a fixed mindset. Consequently they often work under stress because they are striving for the right way to do things. They may excel and move through their failures but odds are they will burn out or give up due to the stress.

The second category of people sees failure as a “learning” mindset. They believe success also takes hard work and effort but when failure happens they see the event as an opportunity to learn.

For leaders with a learning mindset, each failure is a new data point that helps them to grow and develop. These folks see failure as a challenge which allows them to be more resilient and less stressed during times of failure. With less stress they are able to persevere and keep moving forward. We also know that innovation and creativity is more available when we are under less stress.

Dweck studied groups of children learning math and demonstrated that high praise for a child about their natural gifts can put so much pressure on them that they are afraid to make mistakes. But if the teachers (and parents) emphasized hard work and continuous learning, the children learned to be resilient when failure or setbacks occurred. They also reported having more fun with math and enjoying school more.

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I have had my share of failures, as we all have. I lost an election that was very important to me just to name one prominent failure in my life. Anyone who has run for office knows that it hurts a lot to lose. What is even worse is having the morning newspaper report your failure on the front page! Most of us would rather keep our failures private.

While we are in the midst of the failure, it is difficult to remember that the failure can be good for us.

J.K. Rowling says that failing in other jobs opened the way for her to finally work at what she was really passionate about. She says “Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one area I believe I truly belonged---fiction writing.”

Here are a few strategies to help you deal with failure:

- ◆ Check your own attitude. Do you fear failure? If so, re-evaluate your beliefs and assess your mindset about failure and how this mindset affects your leadership style. Reading Dweck’s book is a good place to start.
- ◆ Think about times in your past where you “failed”. How did you handle the event? Did it allow an opening for something new or did you put even more stress on yourself and those around you?
- ◆ Create a culture of continuous learning with those you lead. Encourage others to see that there is not a finite or fixed way of doing things and that “we are continuously enlarging our understanding.”
- ◆ Balance accountability with forgiveness. When others are doing their best and being conscientious, notice their hard work. When mistakes are made, acknowledge their effort, forgive and encourage them to keep trying while holding them accountable for their agreed upon work product.
- ◆ Encourage risk-taking. Innovation and creativity is unlikely when people feel constant pressure to perform in a culture with a fixed mindset.

During these uncertain times, many of us may have the opportunity to practice failure. The successful leader leverages these opportunities to continue to learn.

Start today. Take an inventory of your mindset by observing how you handle failure. As a boss, peer, parent, spouse or friend, remember that your attitudes toward failure will spill over in your relationships. Developing the learning mindset can liberate you from a life of stress so that you can enjoy your successes AND failures.



Comments?

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