

ENTERPRISING RURAL FAMILIES



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Failure As A Leadership Tool

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Being willing and able to fail is a leadership skill. Willingness to fail is a necessary leadership skill. After all fear of failure can be a stumbling block to our willingness to step into new or uncharted territory.

In order to succeed, and to thrive, we have to be willing and able to step from failure to failure and not give up. We have to be willing and able to hear the tough feedback and duly note how we've messed up, what we overlooked, what failed and make the necessary adjustments and keep moving forward. We have to take it all in, make the shift, tweak our path, and aim again for our goals.

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"Success is walking from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm." ~Winston Churchill



Richard Farson and Ralph Keys in their *The Failure-Tolerant Leader* share "During his years leading Monsanto, Robert Shapiro was struck by how terrified his employees were of failing. They had been trained to see an unsuccessful product or project as a personal rebuke. Shapiro tried hard to change that perception, knowing that it hindered the kind of creative thinking that fueled his business. He explained to his employees that every product and project was an experiment and that its backers failed only if their experiment was a halfhearted, careless effort with poor results. But a deliberate, well-thought-out effort that didn't succeed was not only excusable but also desirable." Farson and Keys label a leader with this approach to mistake making as 'failure-tolerant leaders'.

What are characteristics of failure-tolerant leaders?

- They work to break down the social and bureaucratic barriers that their people face.
- They engage at a personal level with the people they lead
- They become adept at providing analytical interactions with their people
- They openly admit their mistakes, rather than shifting or placing blame elsewhere

- They effectively root out destructive competitiveness between their people.

In our enterprises we cannot become simplistic or cavalier about failure. There are failures and there are *failures* that simply cannot occur, such as safety and health protocols. A failure-tolerant leader is vigilant in examining what happened and why and can tell the difference



between a cavalier attempt which failed and a sincerely executed attempt that missed the mark. Excusable mistakes are identified, examined, understood and a corrective course determined.

Managing for failure requires a leader to be more engaged, not less. There are several benefits to creating a nonpunitive environment for trying and failing, it can become the basis for learning.

Whether it be in the design lab, the shop or the marketplace, a failure flowing from a carefully designed project provides insight into a path that will work.

Conversations are important within our enterprises. Actually conversations should be occurring regularly about both scenarios: failures and successes. A happenstance success, serendipitous and delightful as it may have been, should be explored with the same curiosity as an unplanned failure. The failure-tolerant manager should be showing interest and expressing support and asking pertinent questions. Questions like: What's new with your project? What kinds of challenges are you facing? If we are looking at the long view, what might be the next steps we are looking at as a company? Conversations should be not so focused on the project's success of failure but the learning that is taking place.

Henry Ford is quoted as saying, "Even a mistake may turn out to be the one thing necessary to a worthwhile achievement." It is so easy to lambast ourselves for mistakes. How often do we replay the "what was I thinking" record, or lament about our stupidity? Rather than continuing with the record and the lament, can you reframe the mistake and discover how it has or will help you achieve something worthwhile?



What is a reframe? It's a questioning tool used in conflict resolution to guide people to take a different look at the situation they find themselves facing. Reframing simply means responding to the speaker in a way that both validates the speaker experience and allows him/her to move from a particular perspective to a potentially more constructive one. Reframing is seeing the current situation from a different perspective, hopefully a more constructive one.

To help the speaker focus more clearly on specific actions or events underlying feelings and opinions.

"He's the most uncooperative employee I've ever had" could be reframed...tell me about some of the ways you see him as being uncooperative.



“I just don’t like that sort of thing”. Could be reframed as...what specific kinds of things bother you the most.

When dealing with contradictory stories and to bring clarity to a situation or to reach agreement on how to proceed from here.

“I wasn’t even there”. Could be reframed as...I’m confused a little bit ago you talked about watching John at the press.”

“He keeps saying I knew about the schedule, but I didn’t” Could be reframed as...Tell me more about the things you did know.

To discourage speaking for others and to encourage ownership of the problem by the parties present and discourage indirect communication.

“Nobody in this department likes him”. Could be reframed as...Could you tell me more about your interaction with him.

“John and Susie have the same problem believing his stories”. Could be reframed as...Tell me more about the stories you have struggled with.



Techniques of reframing can be used to cultivate creative and critical thinking skills.

Shift from passive to active. “I really doubt I can do anything about this”, you might reframe, what is one small step that you might take?

Shift from negative feeling to positive feeling. “I don’t want to work on that now, it makes me feel sad”, you might reframe, What small part of that might you work on for now, that might leave you feeling a bit more happy?

Shift from past to future. “I’ve never been good at public presentations”, you might reframe, if you imagined yourself as successful at a public presentation, how would you be speaking that would make it successful?

Failure can be a powerful source for growing your enterprise. It teaches about survival, renewal and reinvention. A Failure-Tolerant Leader needs to develop great communication skills. When in the situation of assessing an unexpected failure being aware of verbal blockers to conflict resolution will improve the situation. Several verbal blockers are featured in this month’s sidebar.



Verbal blockers

These are the verbal responses that block listening and disempower others. They imply, you aren't good enough, smart enough or strong enough. Here are some examples:

Advising: Telling the employee how to solve their problems

“Why don't you just...”

“I'd just try to relax...”

Judging: Negatively evaluating the speaker and/or their problem

“Don't get so nervous about it...”

“That's not a very constructive attitude...”

“I think you're the one that's got to face up to the problem...”

Analyzing/Diagnosing: Telling the speaker about their motives, root causes, etc.

“What's really bothering you is...”

“Your insecurities are coming through...”

“Maybe this is reminding you of why you failed to make the cut...”

Questioning: Probing for information about the speaker's problem, implying judgement.

“Why did you do that?”

“Are you being as thorough as you should be?”

Reassuring/Minimizing: Trying to make the speaker feel better by minimizing the experience.

“Don't worry about it, just trust yourself...”

“Cheer up. A month from now things will look different.”