Are you skilled at failing?

By Dragan Milicevic on April 30, 2017

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."
-Samuel Beckett, author and Noble prize winner

Richard Branson, J.K. Rowling, Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein – What do these individuals have in common, apart from being famous? They all failed many times over. In our society, failing is considered bad, almost a stigma. Success seems to be valued above everything else and often even determines whether we like someone. We want to be around people who succeed, not people who fail. However, to realize our full potential, we need to learn how to fail well.

Failing is a skill – just as much as succeeding
Many of my clients are highly successful and high performing individuals. Their lives are often classical success stories: started playing the piano at age four, skipped a class or two in school, graduated summa cum laude from an Ivy League university and landed a top job with a prestigious company, law firm, investment bank or consulting firm. Although they have rarely failed they are haunted by the fear of it. Rather than learning to fail, they instead avoid situations where failure is possible. However, inevitably, they will fail one day. Then they find themselves utterly helpless. For many, it feels like the end of the world.

Without the skill to fail well, we may live life constantly fearing failure and unable to cope with it. Fear of failure can prevent us from realizing our dreams: instead of shooting for the stars, we might settle for a safe job we don't love. Instead of risking failure by tackling a challenging project, we might plug along for another year of the same. Instead of looking for opportunities to grow, we might choose safe bets. But in doing so, we never learn how to fail well. What can you do when something has gone terribly wrong? How can you process what has happened? How do you deal with the emotions? What are your next steps? Should you try again? Or should you do something completely different instead? Should you talk about the failure with others? People who lack the skill to fail do not have answers to these questions. Thus the skill to fail well is as much a skill as succeeding.

Why fear failure in the first place?

I have noticed that my clients fear failure for many reasons. One core theme is that people often link failure or success with their self-worth. It becomes THEM, part of their identity. They cannot distinguish between themselves and their failure or their success. Their brain interprets, "I have failed" as "I AM a failure". My goal is to help them learn to reprogram their brain so that they realize "I have failed and I am NOT a failure". People who fail well do not make failure part of their identity. Rather, they can lightly joke about it, knowing "I am more than my failure or my success".

Underneath the pattern "I have failed. I am a failure" is often perfectionism erroneously labelling imperfection as failure, and inappropriately viewing perfection as the only road to success. As a coach, I help my clients view perfectionism as a double-edged sword: The idea can propel you to high performance while being perfect is humanly impossible and does not equal success. I help them learn that forgiving themselves is a key skill in dealing with imperfection and thus failure in their eyes.

Learning to fail

Knowing how to fail is a precondition to realizing your full potential. Since failing is associated with taking risk, the greater the risk, the more likely you are to fail. If you have never failed you can increase the risk level and trigger failure by intentionally preparing for something small in your job less thoroughly than you normally would. For example, do a small project in an area you are unfamiliar with, send an email without editing and checking it carefully, hold a presentation with little practice.

If you have experienced failure before here are six things how to deal with it well:

- **24-hour rule:** When you fail, give yourself 24 hours to vent your emotions however you want to without harming yourself or someone else.
- **Interrupt negative self-talk:** According to Andrea Abele-Brehm, psychologist at the University of Erlagen, individuals who deal with failure well stop negative thoughts early on. After venting your emotions, focus on reflecting on and learning from the situation. Learning creates positive energy, while judging yourself creates negative energy and can lead to a negative spiral.
- **Externalise failure:** When we fail, we tend to see the reason only within ourselves. According to Martin Seligman, psychologist and founder of positive psychology, people who manage setbacks very well tend to look at external factors for their failure. Develop a more realistic view on why you have failed. It takes more to fail than just "you".
- **Develop humour:** Joachim Stoeber of the University of Kent found that individuals who develop a sense of humour around failure are more capable of dealing with failure. We often take ourselves too seriously, forgetting that the world will continue to rotate regardless of how well we deliver a presentation or how well a project is going.
- **Boost your self-worth:** It is tempting to believe that self-worth is generated by achievement, but this is untrue. Studies in developmental psychology have shown that relationships matter – being accepted for who you are and not for what you are. Ask your friends why they are friends with you. What do they like about you? Ask your partner/parents what they appreciate about you. What's unique about you?

- **Forgive yourself:** The inability to forgive ourselves often makes us dwell on our failures. Ask that inner voice that is putting you down for forgiveness. Just as negative self-talk perpetuates negative behaviour, positive self-talk perpetuates positive behaviour. Telling yourself out loud "I accept and forgive myself even though I have failed" can have healing power.

Branson, Rowling, Jobs and Einstein may not have achieved such great success if they had not learned to fail well. Practicing failing and learning from that experience can help us generate a positive outlook on the future, a sense of trust in ourselves. The mindset "Things will be fine – I have failed before and I have worked it out" gives us the confidence to take greater risks without fear, embracing failure along the path to success. So, next time you experience failure, remember it is your path to success. Or as Bob Dylan once said "There is no success like failure".