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Executive Search & Board Advisory

7 LEARNINGS FROM FAILURE THAT A TRUE LEADER SHOULD RECOGNISE



“When written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.” John F. Kennedy

Sir Winston Churchill put it so eloquently, “Success is the ability to move from one failure to another without loss of enthusiasm.” Everyone discusses their success, few discuss their failures.

Blenheim Partners was recently in a conversation with a Chief Executive (“CEO”) who described how they were in a meeting and everyone in the Executive team listed off their recent success stories. “We weren’t the No. 1 in the market, we weren’t even No. 2. I thought for a second and said I have a loss to discuss, and I want to discuss it because we need to ensure that the competitor doesn’t keep winning.”

The CEO’s view was simple: “how can you ever improve if you never discuss where you went wrong?” In the CEO’s mind, the lack of willingness to discuss failures was a display of a sub-optimal corporate culture.

One only needs to read about every great success story, and you will see that individuals and organisations met with obstacles, disruption and disappointment, but learnt from their failings or mistakes. There is the saying “If you aren’t failing you aren’t trying hard enough.”

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Ultimately, it comes down to how you perceive failure, is it something you should run away from or something you should meet head on and resolve to find a solution?

Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner, Blenheim Partners, said “failure is an opportunity in disguise. Why do we allow failure to dominate if it is a chance to pause and try again, this time with more wisdom and experience?”

Some reasons for allowing failure to dominate can be:

1. A closed mind.

It is easy to believe what you know is right and to cling to certain perceptions. But that is hiding. You need an open mind, you need curiosity, you need to grow and learn, and you have to throw away your fixed views and be open in your assessment of failure if you are to find solutions.

2. Stalled growth.

We all have natural gifts and talents, but they can only get us so far. You have to keep advancing; this means keep learning, keep reading, keep challenging yourself, keep pushing yourself. Get out of your comfort zone. Test yourself.

3. No goal, no milestone.

If you don't know where you are going one little obstacle will halt your progress, or it will deviate you from your path. You will find excuses, you will settle for mediocrity, and it will become too difficult. A person who knows where they are going accepts the obstacle as a challenge, something to look back on as a sense of achievement once they have overcome it. Leaders have a purpose, they have the courage to keep moving forward, and they don't make excuses.

4. Lack of resolute thinking.

You have the choice to follow negative or positive thinking. It's easy to listen to all those around you who say “your task is difficult, that you did your best, it's no shame in quitting”. Or you can block that out, and choose an alternative route that says you have set yourself a task of trying to achieve something and that a failure is only a setback. It is a learning opportunity; it is what anyone who has accomplished anything great has had to experience since the beginning of time. “It's a slip, not a fall.” You are not alone in this journey. Have the courage to be the best you can be and don't feel sorry for yourself. You have no time to do so.

5. Move forward.

“Inch by inch it's a cinch, yard by yard it's hard.” In other words, get moving, don't sit back and wait. Achieve a little bit every day. Progress is achieved through effort and work. Take initiative and start. It is better to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission.

6. Self-discipline.

It's up to you, your level of motivation, your wanting to take on new challenges and to experience the fullness of what life has to offer comes down to you. Your family or your friends can help, but you and only you will determine how far you will go. You alone will determine your success. Show your resilience as you will meet with some tough times along the way. "Burn the boats", don't look back and commit to excelling to the best of your abilities. Self-discipline is critical. Action talks.

7. Courage.

Believe in yourself, otherwise, why should others. Have the courage of your conviction, but don't let it dominate, remember you have the ability to succeed. Be enthusiastic, recognise that obstacles are a sign you are moving forward and with your enthusiasm be confident in that you may not know every answer, but you will have the courage not to panic nor retreat. You will find a way.

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Contact us

Sydney p +61 2 9253 0950
Melbourne p +61 3 9653 9510
w www.blenheimpartners.com