

Failure Is An Option

By Susanna Clavello Garza. iPEC

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By now, you may be familiar with the acronym F.A.I.L. - First Attempt in Learning.

When I became a mom for the first time and my daughter was about nine months old, I watched in amazement how she instinctively started to crawl. First she started moving backwards, then shortly after, she finally started to push herself forward. A month later she would stand up and hold herself from the side of the coffee table. First she could hold herself up for a couple of seconds at a time and then increasingly longer periods of time. Around age one, when she was able to let go of the table and finally take a few steps, first holding both of my hands and then completely on her own, she fell on her behind countless times. Each time she would get up, and as she did her muscles became stronger, her coordination became sharper, her self confidence more evident.

About fifteen years later she learned how to drive. As her first driving instructor, I insisted she should learn to use the stick shift, just like I did at her age. I explained that when you can drive a car with the stick, you can drive any car you want for the rest of your life. So she first went through the motions of syncing the left foot on the clutch and the right foot on the gas pedal. She stalled my car countless times, felt frustrated, doubted herself, and got mad at me for making that experience so hard. I'm sure she was about to give up many times, especially when she could not hold back the tears of frustration. Still, we kept practicing every day after school until one day she got it! The syncing eventually became a reflex, and she gained more and more confidence in herself. As time went by, she was in control of the vehicle and ready to ride.

So what are the commonalities between learning how to walk and learning how to drive? The answer is simple -intrinsic motivation. In his [Puzzle of Motivation](#) TED talk, Daniel Pink introduces the three building blocks of intrinsic motivation that yield high quality work: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Both life learning experiences mentioned above required the power to choose to do something that matters to the individual, the ability to do it skillfully, and the personal interest in it. It's through failing that you become a good bike rider or car driver - every failure gives you an opportunity to reflect on what went wrong, make improvements, develop new skills, and become stronger and more self confident. Every instance of failure ignites a deep desire to do something better instead of giving up.

Examples of learning by failure are abundant in the history of humankind. Thomas Alva Edison made 700 attempts to invent the lightbulb before succeeding. Michael Jordan missed thousands of shots and hundreds of games before becoming a champion. Even perceived failures resulted in great inventions such as super glue, post-it notes, velcro, and rubber.

Examples of learning by failure are equally abundant in life experiences. Think for example of learning to ride a bike, play an instrument, cook, play a sport, or even date. None can be accomplished without numerous downfalls. So why do we try so hard to resist and avoid a crucial step in the natural process of learning?

The Oxford Dictionaries define failure as “the omission of expected or required action,” in other words, we didn’t meet our expectation. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines failure as “lack of success.” When we feel highly motivated, failure is just a transitional stage that we go through as we strive to meet high expectations of ourselves and our goal to be successful.

Yet, we focus a lot of attention on avoiding failure. In many schools, the motto is failure is not an option. The obsession created by high stakes testing and strict accountability systems has given no choice to educators but to do everything in their power and imagination to keep students from experiencing setbacks. The focus is therefore on remediation, intervention, modifications, benchmarking, sheltering, differentiation, and adaptations - all implemented in good faith to increase student performance. This is, after all, what the current school system is expected to do. Yet the system is not designed to allow students to learn how to learn, bring out their best and develop lifelong learning skills.

Success in standardized tests is only one way to measure student learning, however, if success is measured solely by this single standard, students will unlikely retain any of the content after the test. Schools with such a single focus of testing success often fail to foster the lasting benefits of grit, perseverance, resilience, and determination -all critical ingredients to success in school and life after K-12.

I’d like to make a disclaimer. When I speak of failure I am not referring to setting students up for failure, or not providing the encouragement, support and resources needed for them to succeed. The point I want to make is that when intrinsic motivation is present, failure has great benefits.

Some people warn us -in good faith- to not aim too high, or else we might be disappointed. In other words, they ask us to be “realistic.” What happens as a result is that we keep our expectations low and stay in our comfort zone, thus avoiding *not* meeting our expectations and experiencing the negative impact of failure on self efficacy and self esteem. As a result, we never achieve our personal or professional dreams or goals because we fear screwing up. We may complain and blame the circumstances, and at the end we will not accomplish anything.

The explanation is simple. When we don’t step outside our comfort zone, don’t want to take risks, make a bunch of excuses, or don’t even try, we are sabotaging ourselves, we let ourselves down, we hide from ourselves, and become our own barrier to success. If success is indeed our ultimate goal -however we want to define it- this avoidance of failure does not serve us. It is important to reach this level of awareness so we can get out of our own way.

Let's take a look at failure from a different perspective. The principle is simple: Every thought or belief creates a feeling or emotion, which in turn creates an action or inaction, which creates a result. So if fear is the feeling and failure the result, the thought or belief that starts this chain is not wanting to experience negative emotion. Make sense?

Let me illustrate this with an example.

Thought / Belief: "I'm expected to start flipping my lessons now that my school has provided the training. If I don't, I may get in trouble. The problem is technology is not my thing. I feel embarrassed that my students know more than I do."

Feeling / Emotion: Fear, lack of self confidence, uncertainty

Action: The teacher will implement the new strategy with some hesitation and may give up at the first sign of failure. Motivation is based on fear.

Result: Will vary from a small degree of success to complete disaster

Here are a few other negative thoughts or beliefs you may have heard. "I've tried that before and it didn't work so why bother?" "I don't have time for that," "My students can't do that," or "I am too old for that." The more we believe these thoughts, the more we limit ourselves. That's why these thoughts are called limiting beliefs.

When we don't meet your own expectations, the only meaning is the meaning we give it. In reality we have control of our thoughts and therefore of our emotions. We have control on the interpretation we choose if we do not meet our own expectations. For example, if we think of a failed experience in a way that is disappointing or frustrating, that negative emotion will cause us pain. On the other hand, if we think of it as an opportunity to grow and make things better in the future, the emotion will be a positive one.

We can only fail when our expectations are high. The lower our expectations, the lower the risk of failing, the lower the quality of the outcome and the lower our pride in ourselves. On the other hand, if success is meeting our own expectations and the expectations are high, then we may need to fail multiple times in order to succeed. In Thomas J. Watson's words, "If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate."

Each time we fail, we need to honor ourselves and take it as an opportunity to learn and appreciate our courage. If we think this way, we are much more willing to take action and step outside our comfort zone. It's only when we step outside our comfort zone that we create an opportunity to grow, and growth can make us feel uncomfortable.

The good news is that we have full control of what failure means to us. As human beings we want to feel confident and the best way to build self confidence is to change the limiting belief that initiates the chain reaction. Instead of avoiding failure, let's embrace it and pursue it, and think that failure exists to help us get better each time.

If failure is perceived as a negative label in our mind, why not rename it to a more positive term such as "learning experience?" Let's rehearse.

Thought / belief: "I need to allow more time for socratic circles in class and want to give flipped learning a try but have never done this before. I will plan it carefully and try different approaches until I make it work. If something doesn't work quite the way I planned it, I will learn from the experience and make it better next time."

Feeling / emotion: Optimism, enthusiasm, courage

Action: The teacher will implement the new strategy with students and is mentally prepared for the learning curve. Her motivation is intrinsic.

Result: Success is inevitable.

The more we change the initial thought or belief to a positive one, the more impact we have on the end result. This may be easier said than done, though. Why? Because we need to train our brain to think differently. Replacing negative thoughts of fear with positive thoughts of fearlessness can only be achieved through consistency, time and patience. In other words, every time fear shows up, ask yourself what is the thought that triggers it and replace it with a positive thought that evokes a positive emotion. By doing this you can change the way failure -or the lack of- impacts you. The action that follows and the end result will be in direct proportion to the positive energy in your thought.

Here are some examples:

Instead of "I've tried that before and it didn't work so why bother?" think "If I tweak it I bet I can make it work."

Instead of "I don't have time for that," replace with "I will figure out a way to use my time more efficiently."

Instead of "My students can't do that," try "All students have talent and I want to figure out what makes them tick."

Instead of "I am too old for that," tell yourself "I am a lifelong learner."

Instead of "What are others going to think of me?" think instead "What I think of myself is the only opinion that matters to me."

You get the picture.

One of my favorite coaching principles says, "Life offers neither problems nor challenges, only opportunities." (Source: Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching). Think of how this principle applies to a student constructing a Rube Goldberg machine then. How many times do you think the student will fail before the complicated contraption works to perfection and is ready to be published in YouTube? And as the student perfects the machine after each attempt, how do you think he or she feels after accomplishing their goal? The answers are simple to predict because autonomy, mastery and purpose are present throughout the whole process.

So, just like the student who created the Rube Goldberg machine, give yourself permission to fail and learn from your mistakes. Give your students permission to fail in their attempt to learn and strive to meet their goals. Document and celebrate each failure for if we never fail we have nothing else to learn. What is the worst thing that can happen? It is what you want to make of it.

As Sir Ken Robinson stated in a 2006 talk, “If you are not ready to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original.”

And if you ever doubt yourself or the power of your own positive thinking, I suggest you make that positive thought your mantra, and recite it until it becomes real. What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?

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