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How Successful Leaders Deal with Failure

Everyone fails at some point in his or her career. It happens to even the most successful leaders. Apple fired Steve Jobs. Western Union fired Thomas Edison for secretly conducting experiments in his office. Walt Disney's newspaper editor told him he wasn't creative enough and then fired him. A Baltimore TV producer told Oprah Winfrey she was "unfit for television news," and then let her go. And look at all of the important, relevant things they went on to do, and the companies they started and led, after surviving those failures.

The mark of a truly successful leader is how he or she reacts to failure. This group, and countless others like them, kept learning, leading and pushing forward to get what they wanted. Many executives think that failure is bad and shouldn't be spoken about, but that couldn't be further from the truth. [Seth Godin](#), bestselling author and marketing guru, says it best: *"Every rejection is a gift. A chance to learn and to do it better next time. An opportunity to figure out how to bounce, not break. Don't waste them."*

Successful leaders fail on a regular basis. Failure comes at them from all sides; there are those failures and stressful events they can control to some degree, and there are those they can't control at all: a production line goes down, a delivery is late, a customer is unhappy, a new regulation requires a major process change. Ultimately, it's both the leader's immediate reaction, and what they do in the aftermath, that influences how their employees see them.

Reacting to failure

One of a leader's top priorities is to set a positive example for those around them. How do they react to the supplier who lets them know at the last minute that the raw material they need to meet a customer's order is out of stock? Are they quick to move to a short-term solution, or are they slow and deliberate as they think through all of the possible outcomes and options? Even in the most critical, time sensitive situations, there's time to listen, think and respond.

There are five steps leaders can take in stressful situations, whether they're in the middle of a highly significant event, or just a stressful day-to-day event:

1. Listen
2. Think critically
3. Communicate openly with all involved
4. Take responsibility where appropriate
5. Negotiate a favorable outcome

Following a methodical, repeatable process helps ensure the appropriate outcome, for both the leader and the team they're leading.

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5 things you'll learn from failing

Each time you respond successfully to a failure, it's a chance to pivot and plan for a strong, appropriate reaction to future events. Failure teaches you about survival, and about starting over. If you really want to learn about a person's character, ask about their failures. If they aren't willing to name at least a few, most likely they're not willing to take risks, or they don't value the benefits of failing and are too proud to look at their own.

Leadership guru Glenn Llopis has developed a list of what he considers the [five key takeaways from failure](#).

Learn from the event

Take the time to think about what happened. Reflect on the experience and discuss what went well and what could have been done differently. Analyze the situation while the pain is fresh, and plan for your response to the next stressful event using the knowledge you've gained.

Build your team and make your business better

What did the situation teach you about your team? Were individuals' reactions effective and acceptable, or do you or someone on the team need specialized training? The outcome will definitely show you ways to change and improve that will make your team, and the company, stronger and more innovative.

Trust your gut and make more, and better, decisions

After failure, you'll be more comfortable trusting your own instincts. That is, once you see why you failed, understand your reaction and explore what you could have done differently or what you could have done to avoid the situation in the first place.

See the second chances that are all around you

Failure is not the end. Surviving failure, even multiple failures, opens your eyes, allowing you to see the possibilities that you might not have been willing to explore before. And with the new skills and tolerance for risk you've developed in response, you'll be more willing to take on new roles and projects that you wouldn't have considered otherwise.

Appreciate who you are as a leader

Coming through failure reminds you why you continue to lead and gives you a better understanding of how what you do affects those you lead. And once you have a chance to evaluate what you and your team have gone through, you'll see that you've all grown a little.



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In the end

A little self-pity is ok, but it's not ok to wallow in it. It's important to move forward, remedy the situation effectively without rushing to bad judgment and then make a plan for avoiding similar situations. (Inc. Magazine has a great list of the [things NOT to do when reacting to failures or setbacks.](#))

In the moment, it might be difficult to see past the failure, which is why it's so important to listen to those around you and think through all of the possible scenarios before reacting. The added perspective brought on by an occasional failure or a small misstep provides a chance for learning and gaining wisdom that you might not have had access to otherwise. What have you learned about failure that made you a better leader? You can use our comments section below to give us your feedback on failure.

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