

THE F WORD

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The 'F...' word is now synonymous with Wayne Rooney. This 'F' word is more fundamental. I mean FAILURE

If you could take an MRI brain scan of a group of people simultaneously and mention the word 'Failure' I guess the screen would light up for all the wrong reasons!!

Failure is seen as harsh in any language. In our early years it doesn't bother us or anyone else for that matter because we seem to fail all the time except then it is called 'learning'. For those first 5 years we are all experimenting and we do/did indeed learn from our failings sometimes painfully.

After about 5 years of age the negative effect of 'failure' is reinforced by most education systems and overbearing parents, frowned upon by business and bosses alike and generally avoided at all costs. No one wants to be associated with it and in some cultures particularly here in Asia failure it is almost the kiss of death. And yet this perception creates even more failure - why?

Steve Jobs the founder and creator of Apple

has recently been described as a 'Corporate Dictator' who refuses to accept failure at all. When Apple released its iPhone 3G and MobileMe service about three years ago it suffered its most humiliating failure to date. The team was summoned, an expletive rant was delivered and they were never given the chance to right the wrongs - they were fired! Larry Ellison of Oracle apparently adopts an equally acerbic approach to failure. The top sales person for the quarter gets a crown to put in his office on full view to the office. The worst performing sales person gets a large donkey for his office also on full view to the office. I wonder if you would ever get the donkey twice!!

Yet notable global luminaries past and present have a different view namely:-

As Henry Ford said. "Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, only this time more wisely."

Winston Churchill said "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm"

Proctor & Gamble's former legendary CEO

A.G. Lafley was very open on failure. "I had my fair share of failure. However it's all part and parcel of growth and development. It's like Darwin's theory. When you stop learning you stop developing and growing".

J.K. Rowling said "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well have not lived at all". That is backed up by the renowned creativity and innovation expert Sir Ken Robinson's who said "If you have never done anything wrong you have never had an original thought"

Clearly if the seven people mentioned above were on a panel debating the subject it would be a very lively debate indeed. In business how do we perceive failure? Clearly it can have dire consequences. I wonder; has Steve Jobs never had one single failure that he did learn, or, could have learnt from? I personally doubt it.

I am not suggesting we except failure carte blanche without question. I am however suggesting we should tolerate failure when we fully understand what type of failure we are dealing with and not leap to



condemnation as a first response. When you understand exactly what type of failure you are looking at you might change your approach. Is it one of the following which is by no means an extensive list?

1. A deliberate and intentional breach of the rules, policy or process
2. A deliberate disregard of a specific instruction
3. A lack of focus, attention or application to the task
4. The task was beyond the required skill and competency set
5. A person or team was unclear as to what they were seeing and just blundered along
6. Style exceeded substance.
7. An experiment, test or pilot that produces different results to that which was expected
8. Something happened that was outside the control of the process.

Well, would you view your approach differently? Again I suggest you would. In particular the last two would have clearly avoided a potentially greater error and the opportunity to make any necessary changes and a subsequent success.

I would further suggest that a failure that brings a tide of unbridled criticism on you and/or your team will almost certainly result in people 'keeping their heads' down and is that what you want. Put your head above the trench in the future and watch it get shot off is hardly a mature response to failure

I firmly believe that for people to grow failure is inevitable and goes hand in hand with organizations who aspire to the highest standards

In my 30 years as a Referee with the last 13 years as a Football League/Premier League Referee I got some decisions wrong for a variety of reasons. It was inevitable. I had to learn to recover from an error quickly because if I didn't then my overall performance would have suffered.

Organisations can equally control how they understand failure, learn from it, recover from it and move on. Yes, it is both mental and emotional rather than physical.

Another trap is the belief that learning from

a failure is straightforward, only it isn't. The usual approach is form a review committee, review everything, and write a report which apportions blame, well almost every time. What a waste of learning time!

This is an issue that demands strong leadership within a strong culture. It requires carefully maintaining a fine balance between not discouraging risk taking/experimentation and avoiding an 'anything goes' message.

Reviewing failure requires, as strange as it may sound, a high degree of enthusiasm and determination within a trusted process. As I said above, the process is an emotional one because no one wants to carry the can. The medical profession as one example has adopted a 'no blame' process in the event of an unusual/unexpected death where something was believed to be, or seen to be, lacking.

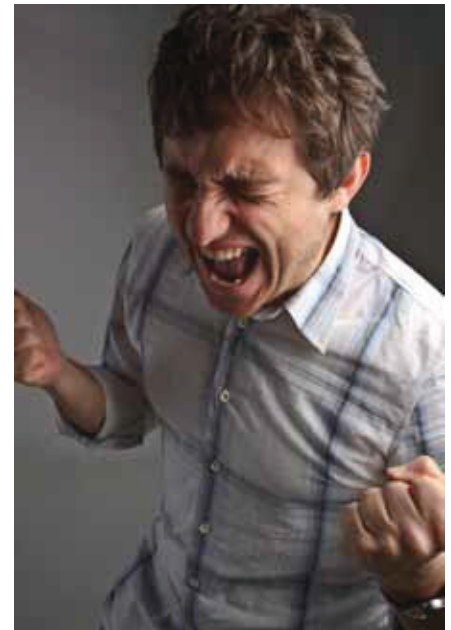
Failure manifests itself in the failure, yes failure, to engage across the spectrum of what is today a very diverse and increasingly complex work force.

I learnt a valuable, some might say, surprising lesson from a wise and experienced board member of a major merchant bank. It was this. Venture Capitalists are very hesitant to invest in a project or founder who has not suffered a failure? Are you surprised – maybe, maybe not.

If you have watched the BBC's "Dragons Den" an individual failure within a track record is given favourable airtime by the experienced panelists. Not having faced a failure is seen as a gap in the experience curve whereas a failure is seen as a positive by most venture capitalists.

As a simple personal example, I interviewed a candidate for a sales manager position who told me proudly that he had recruited some 100+ people in his career. When I asked him how many of those had not made the grade (failed) he said smiling with pride "None". "Wow" I thought - I didn't hire him.

Yet what principles are we applying in the corporate world when recruiting or managing people when failure occurs/has occurred? The interviewee who offers up that he indeed had a product development



project fail or a manager where the deliverables on a task were missed? As I have said in previous posts I project fail or a manager admits that deliverables on a task were missed? I would put money upon reading your thoughts most of you would take a 'mental step back' or when faced with a failure in any circumstances, by nature we tend to retreat.

So here are some final thoughts you might like to consider for minimising failure:-

- Picture, literally, success and failure side by side - mind maps are very helpful
- Get as much information and knowledge as possible, but not as an excuse to delay taking action.
- Balance the risk and the gain – banks please note
- Do not under fund an initial project otherwise you set yourself up to fail
- If it fails, fail early
- Learn and consider celebrating failure.

Failure manifests itself in the failure, yes failure, to engage across the spectrum of what is today a very diverse and increasingly complex work force. It all starts with a constructive and robust process for bringing all the components together. For more information please contact the author via email at ray@think8.net

