

You have to fail to succeed

ALL of us have faced that moment, probably more than once in our careers, when something has not worked out the way we would have liked it. The usual response is one of being unsettled, fearful of what is going to happen, embarrassment etc. What follows next is either a knee jerk reaction in doubling one's efforts to put it right or a period of depression.

So what may be the first lesson to learn from failure? We should look at it as a major learning opportunity that all too often we ignore. The second lesson is to look at it as a positive not a negative.

Now both of those statements may come as a shock, and I also appreciate cultural issues play a part. Yet looking at examples from around the world, I have never seen any value in spending time looking for someone to blame. The third and no less important

lesson is learning how to handle it and deal with it.

Many notable captains of industries, especially those who have written books and/or given speeches, refer many times to their own failures. The common denominator with all of them was the manner in which they handled and dealt with it.

So let us look at this issue from two perspectives. Firstly, if you are a manager and secondly from an individual point of view.

As a manager, the way you handle failures speak volumes about your managerial competency. Whether it is just one person or a few people involved, this becomes a coaching session. What you are trying to do is avoid your team shying away from taking risks in the future as that would be counter productive. What you do not do is "to lose

it" however angry you maybe at what has gone wrong.

Ask the team or individual to review the processes they went through on the project or task and at each stage ask how well they thought they had done. Ask what might they do differently now with the benefit of hindsight. Were there any issues that were not looked at as thoroughly as they should have been? Were there any warning signals that were overlooked or ignored? Who else might have been involved in the planning or decisionmaking or someone whose opinion could have helped had they been asked?

What information was gathered, what research was done and was it sufficient to make a decision? What points of reference were used?

Review objectively all the good and not-so-good points. It is more important for the

team or individual to recognise the shortfalls for themselves as distinct from you simply telling them. Company culture will play a part in how well you are able to execute this. If you are in a blame culture, that is a challenge. That said, you can make that change without waiting for something to happen from the top.

If you are a member of a team that has had a setback or just the individual involved, take the problem to your manager or boss straight away.

Secondly, take a plan of action and possible solutions for resolving the problem. Provide a background to the issue to give your manager a feel for the problem. Highlight where you believe the issue/s arose and how you propose to deal with it. At this point ask him/her for their input. This process will demonstrate your ability to handle failure and albeit a painful lesson you will be the better for it.

No one is immune from mistakes and we all hope they do not happen to us. The more we know about what can go wrong, the better we are equipped to handle this. Airline pilots regularly undertake simulator training where they practice all sorts of responses to possible failures. Do you have a "simulator" to anticipate failure?

Last but not least, handing failure is primarily a mental process. If something did not work, the fact you are upset, even angry with yourself is encouraging. It shows a concern. An attitude of "well it's not that important" is when the alarm bells should start

How to make it work to your advantage

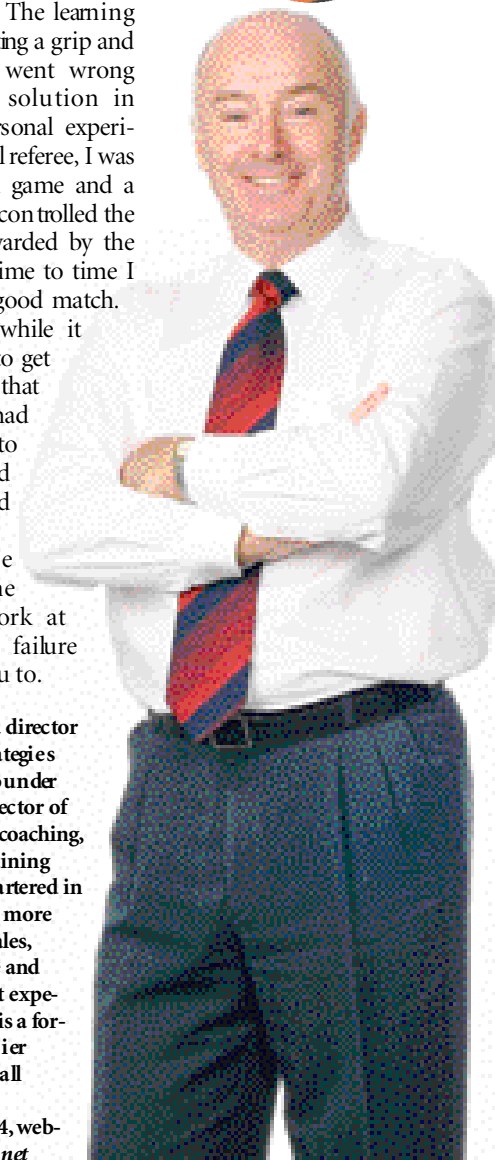
COACHING



ringing as that approach is not acceptable. Do not keep beating yourself up. The learning comes from getting a grip and assessing what went wrong and putting a solution in place. From personal experience as a football referee, I was assessed at each game and a report on how I controlled the match was forwarded by the assessor. From time to time I did not have a good match. Looking back, while it was frustrating to get a low mark for that game, at least I had the opportunity to identify what had not gone well and work on it.

Failure worked for me and, if you work at getting it right, failure can work for you to.

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"If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate."

IBM chairman, Thomas Watson Jnr

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MENTORING



Q I would like your advice on how I can give my career a real uplift. I am in my mid-20s and have been working in the travel industry for four years. I have a good degree in business management. I think it is a case of what I really want to do. I seem to be able to do a lot of things without getting stuck in any one thing in particular. Name withheld, Singapore

FIRST, set out a broad plan in writing starting with where you are now, where you want to be and how you are going to get there. Put estimated timelines against those statements.

Next ask yourself these four questions.

- What work do I do well and enjoy doing
- What work do I do well but do not enjoy doing
- What work do not I do well but enjoy doing
- What work do not I do well and do not enjoy doing.

Next assess your skills and competencies and establish where the gaps are. Identify what devel-

opment programmes you need to attend. Pay particular attention to the needs of companies. More companies are looking not just for functional skills but far more for the skills of communication, influence, persuasion, creativity, innovation, solution seekers, team players and the like.

You did not mention which discipline you are working in now, so a review of whether this is work you are enjoying or could enjoy needs to be answered.

This is where writing your plan as opposed to keeping it in your head will provide a focus.

Focus on keeping yourself employable with skills that are relevant. Equally your ability to adapt to market changes, i.e. an agent of change will hold you in good standing.

Use the resources in your present company to establish your plan guidelines starting with your boss assuming there are no issues there. Find a mentor to help act as a sounding board.

Finally be prepared to take risks and treat failure as a learning curve.

Have a work-related issue or problem? Write to Ray (ray@think8.net).