

## Dealing with Failure

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 11/08/2007

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) is credited with the invention of the phonograph and the electric light bulb. When asked about his numerous experimental failures, he said: “I have not failed 700 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work. When I have eliminated the ways that will not work, I will find the way that will work.” Whether this is apocryphal or not, it nonetheless conveys the message that “failure” is just a matter of perspective!

More recently, Edward de Bono said “It is better to have enough ideas for some of them to be wrong, than to be always right by having no ideas at all.”

Most of us believe we're judged by our successes and failures, and that there's some disgrace associated with “failure.” Yet if we look around us, we see many examples of peoples' failures bringing value to our lives. For example, in 1938 one Roy Plunkett, a research chemist at DuPont's Laboratories, “fell upon” Teflon®, a surface coating whose applications now range from the aerospace industry to the kitchen. Dynamite, Velcro®, Cellophane, and Post-it® Notes are other examples of “failures” becoming hero products.

So, how can we cope with “failure?”

### What You Need to Know

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#### **I've been job hunting for over six months now but with little success. At what point do I concede failure and give up?**

It is often said that we give up on our dreams just one moment before they are fulfilled. Persistence seems to be the key, as is a very clear idea of what we wish to achieve. So, if finding new position is really what you want, keep at it a little while longer. You never know how close you are to hitting the jackpot! If you are not doing it already, ask the employers who have turned you down if they can give you any feedback on your application or interview performance, so that you can work on any areas that are letting you down. Remember, once you decide to give up, you have also given up on your chance of succeeding.

#### **I feel so disheartened about a series of recent failures that I can't seem to find the energy to try again. What can I do to get myself focused again after these setbacks?**

Focusing on the past and worrying about the way things have turned out is not a productive use of your creative energy. There is nothing you can do to change these experiences, but you can

“reframe” them—in other words, look at them from a different perspective. See them as learning experiences and reflect on what you can do differently another time. Be curious about what happened and why rather than judging yourself for being unable: you can learn those skills and by knowing where you went wrong, you can actively avoid those pitfalls next time around.

## **I am tackling a risky but important project and my name is bound up in its success. If the project doesn't deliver, what can I do to ensure I am not perceived as a failure?**

It sounds as if this is a high-visibility enterprise. You might think through the different outcome scenarios and create some contingency plans that will enable you to pick things up credibly if any of them should come to fruition. This will make you appear to be in command of the situation. Managing expectations early on with key stakeholders—your boss, say, or clients, colleagues, or other interested parties—is also a good option. If you are running into problems, alert other people to the situation and explain what your approach is. That gives them the opportunity to pitch in with help if they feel it is appropriate, and you have also covered your back.

## **What to Do**

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Coping with failure is an art—as well as the sign of a robust personality. Most of us fear failure because we do not want to risk feeling incompetent, useless, and foolish. However, by looking failure full in the face, you are courting the greatest success. Try celebrating the fact that you are willing to put yourself on the line for something you believe in and play for high stakes. You never know when one of your projects will pay off and enhance your reputation significantly.

Here are some ideas for preventing failure in the first place.

## **Have Positive Expectations**

Envisage a positive outcome rather than a negative one. If you focus on your worst fears you may manifest them, so run the desired successful scenario through your mind with the intention that this is the one that will come to fruition. This is not about being in denial, but creating a positive environment where the likelihood of the best outcome is increased.

## **Be Proactive**

Do not wait for things to run away with you until you are forced to act. If things are going off the rails, intervene as soon as you think it is necessary in order to straighten them out. Problems will not go away by themselves, so the sooner you act, the sooner a solution will be found.

## **See “Failure” As Part of the Creative Process**

Just as Edison did, look at your creative endeavors as part of a bigger picture and allow the intrinsic successes and failures of the creative process take on their proper proportion in relation to the totality of what you are trying to achieve.

## **Take a Risk**

Playing safe means that you will probably repeat past achievements, but it also means that you are unlikely to gain any new successes. What is the worst that can happen? Can any mistakes you make really be that bad in the grand schemes of things? If not, and you can live with them, why not give a new approach a try?

## **Be Disciplined, Dedicated, and Determined**

In the worlds of film and music, we often see examples of so-called “overnight” success. What we do not see is the discipline, dedication, and determination that have enabled someone to reach their aspirations. Success is a hard slog, even though the media would have us believe that it can be gained instantly and without effort. You need to rally and focus your energies in order to succeed in the long run—and then you can claim your rightful satisfaction and celebrate!

## **Make Clear Choices**

Often, we have to choose one path over another in order to meet our goals. This isn't always a cut and dried decision, as many of us like to “hedge our bets” just in case one path does not lead us to where we want to go. Trying to use two approaches once only divides resources and halves our ability to succeed, however. You run the risk of falling between two opposing sets of objectives and

end up achieving less than you might otherwise have done. You may have to sacrifice a lesser dream in order to achieve a greater one!

## **Be Decisive: Take “Active” Decisions**

If you allow the ebbs and flows of your project to guide you, you will merely be presiding over the process as a passive observer. Even if you decide *not* to do something, make sure you've consciously chosen that path rather than just given up and let things happen to you. “Active” choices are so much more powerful than “passive” ones and they will make sure you remain engaged and influential.

## **Make Contingency Plans**

Think about what you would do if your fears materialize so that you're not caught on the hop. Run different scenarios through your mind and imagine yourself dealing with these in an assertive and confident way. Preparing yourself in this way will ensure that you know what to do, whatever the eventuality.

If the worst does happen, there are plenty of useful strategies you can use for coping with failure.

## **Face Your Fears**

Knowing yourself well helps you manage the ups and downs of your achievements. Try to understand what “failure” means to you. According to the communicational framework of Transactional Analysis (TA), we have five drivers: Be Perfect, Hurry Up, Be Strong, Please Others, and Try Hard. One of these drivers may be responsible for your sense of failure. If, for example, you are driven by a need to “be perfect,” failure will hit you hard because the driver central to your sense of well being and confidence has been thwarted. Once you understand your own weak spots, you can identify coping strategies that will help you move through your sense of failure quickly.

## **Ask for Feedback**

If you are bewildered by your lack of success, find a trusted friend or colleague to ask for feedback. You may learn something about yourself that you did not know. We often unconsciously sabotage

ourselves by making assumptions and acting upon them as if they were the truth—but they may not be true for other people.

## **Create Coping Strategies**

If you know you that not getting things right all the time affects you badly, think of the ways you could be assisted or comforted if things do not go according to plan. You might like to find a sounding board or coach who will help you think things through. You might like to arm yourself with a set of positive affirmations or a place to go that will remind you what you really care about and give you a sense of perspective. Perhaps you like walking in nature and thinking alone, or maybe you enjoy taking part in group activities. Whatever your preferences, create a menu of activities you can call on to support you in these moments. Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a behavioral framework that may help you understand your inner landscape and find coping strategies to help you through.

## **Find Something to Do That You Know You Are Good At**

You might like to remind yourself of your worth by doing something at which you excel: anything from cooking to art, sport, music, you name it. Spend some time doing this to refresh your confidence and give you the boost of energy you will need to try again.

Remember, it is not *you* who has failed, merely an experiment you were conducting!

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Worry You Look Like a Fool**

Failing in some capacity often means that we are introduced to our vulnerabilities, and we may feel exposed, embarrassed, and a bit of a fool. No one would willingly look for that type of outcome, but by holding ourselves back and not risking failure, we are keeping ourselves small. We are not really living if we try to protect ourselves from trying new things: you will not fail, but you will not succeed at anything either. To spur you on, think of the times that you have taken a risk and it has paid off. Remember that feeling of pride and achievement.

## **You Take It Personally**

Failure is not about “you” as a person, but how you interact with the world. None of us gets everything right all of the time, but it does not mean we are not successful human beings. Try to distance yourself from the personal impact that your failures may have and be objective about your experiences. In this way, you can learn from them and try something different another time.

## **You Focus On Failure**

Sometimes we are so fearful of failure that we unwittingly make it our goal. We know that if goals are set clearly and measurably, whether they be positive or negative, our energy is directed at meeting them. If we focus on failure, it creeps into our subconscious mind as a goal, and we find ourselves creating the conditions for it to happen. To avoid this, discipline yourself to focus on the positive outcome so that your success is manifested, not your failure.

## **You Will Not Change Your Approach**

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” If your approach is not working, try something else.

## **You Lose Patience**

We often get impatient and seek short cuts or compromises when we are unable to reach our goals. Do not reduce your goals in response to your impatience. Keep your eye on what you really want and remember that discipline, dedication, and determination are necessary if you want a worthwhile success.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Manz, Charles C. *The Power of Failure: 27 Ways to Turn Life's Setbacks into Success*. Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

Ready, Romilla and Kate Burton. Neuro-linguistic Programming for Dummies. Wiley, 2004.

## **Web Site:**

Coping.org: [www.coping.org](http://www.coping.org)

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