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REDEEMING THE "F" WORD: WHY FAILURE ISN'T A DIRTY WORD



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Great leaders have adaptive capacity; they see failure as a friend, not an enemy. A critical factor in every leader's philosophy of ministry is defining success. A critical factor in every organization's culture is how it responds to failure. We fail smarter when we share what we have learned widely. We fail faster when we refuse to allow setbacks to keep us from innovating in the future. Ministry leaders struggle to fail smarter and faster because we spiritualize, rationalize and institutionalize failure. A dysfunctional response to failure makes us slow to eliminate old projects and slow to initiate new projects.

A formative moment that helped shape my thoughts about failure in ministry came unexpectedly almost twenty years ago in a conversation with a young leader I was mentoring. He was thinking about launching a new ministry but was troubled by the fact his failure rate seemed inordinately higher than any ministry of which he was aware. When I asked a few follow-up questions he went on to explain that he received a number of missionary prayer letters each month as well as organizational newsletters and none of them ever said anything about a ministry initiative that didn't work. He was comparing his personal experience with what he read and concluded he might not



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be cut out for ministry.

I know that may seem really naïve but I remember it vividly and he was very sincere. I explained to him that of course all of those missionaries and organizations had tried things that didn't work. He interrupted me with passion in his voice to ask a powerful question, "Why don't they ever talk about it?" That young leader went on to start an evangelistic ministry that has global reach today. But I think I got just as much, perhaps more out of our conversation than he did.

A few years later I had the opportunity to recruit young leaders from all over the world to participate in a global consultation held in England. The organizers of the event wanted ten percent of the delegates to be young leaders. I was responsible for planning a two day pre-consultation program for the young leader delegation. One of the highlights was inviting some of the big name leaders who were speaking at the event to share with the young leaders. But instead of asking them to teach a leadership lesson we asked them to share informally about their journey as a leader. As part of this interaction we asked the leaders to share one of their biggest failures, along with how they responded and what they learned from it. That question was consistently one of the most powerful parts of the interview and generated some of the greatest conversation.

Adaptive Capacity

All great leaders have what Warren Bennis has described as adaptive capacity, which enables them to see failure as a friend, not an enemy. "When things don't turn out as they had hoped, they morph (transmogrify) failure into something palatable, even desirable. They see approaches that don't work not as something shameful, but as sources of valuable information that will eventually lead to a successful outcome."³⁷

The pathway to mastery is almost always marked by bursts of sudden brilliance and intermittent failure. In moments of deep change, where major course corrections are needed, the only way to flatten the learning curve is through failure. In reset moments we need to fail smarter and faster. We fail smarter when we share what we have learned widely so others can benefit and faster when we refuse to allow

temporary setbacks to keep us on the sidelines. When it comes to innovation, not making any mistakes is just as bad as making the same ones over and over again.

A critical component in every leader's philosophy of ministry is how you define success. A critical factor in every organization's culture is how you respond to failure. In my experience business leaders are much better than ministry leaders at creating an organizational culture that views failure as an essential ingredient of success. A.G. Lafley, former CEO of Procter & Gamble, in an interview with *Harvard Business Review*, said, "I think of my failures as a gift." He went on to say, "It's not enough to take responsibility for your failures. It's important to create a culture that turns failures into learning and leads to continual improvement."³⁸ I've been reflecting on this and have identified three reasons why I believe it's harder for ministry leaders to create this kind of culture: we spiritualize, rationalize and institutionalize our response to failure. Let me unpack each of these ideas briefly.

Three Limiting Factors

First, we *spiritualize* our approach to failure, believing it suggests we either were not hearing from God or He was not blessing our work. Neither of those are acceptable explanations for much of our failure. In my experience, business leaders, including those who commit their company and activity to the Lord, are less inclined to spiritualize the outcomes of their work in the same way ministry leaders do. That's understandable. But I believe God allows some of our efforts to fail because He knows it is the best way for us to learn what we need to know to succeed down the road. Leaders who over-spiritualize failure often paralyze their team, making it more difficult to learn from mistakes and keep trying.

Second, we *rationalize* our response to failure, believing we need to communicate exclusively positive messages to our constituents to keep them motivated and engaged. This is why the young leader I referenced at the beginning of this chapter never read about initiatives that didn't work; in spite of the fact he received numerous prayer letters and newsletters. Some organizations stoop to outright exaggeration of their results, spinning the outcomes in a favorable light much like politicians who curry the favor of voters. A more common approach is to simply redefine the metrics to focus on whatever

portion of the project came out the best. So if the number of people participating was much smaller than we projected we emphasize how deep we were able to go with the smaller group. We count and report whatever makes us look good to our constituents, regardless of whether the data point has a direct relationship with the bottom line impact we were hoping to produce.

Third, we *institutionalize* our response to failure by delegating up to the board in an attempt to minimize the damage to our credibility. I've talked with business leaders who tell me, "I'm not afraid of making a mistake today because if I do I'll fix it tomorrow." Ministry leaders tend to become tentative and gun shy in the face of failed initiatives, which often results in a delayed response that corresponds with the cycle of the next board meeting. By delegating up to the board, getting them to cover our backs, we attempt to insulate ourselves from negative consequences associated with failure.

I'm not advocating a freewheeling maverick approach to leadership that operates outside appropriate oversight or accountability. I'm merely suggesting one of the challenges ministry leaders face in creating a culture that "turns failure into learning and leads to continual improvement" is a model of governance that rewards leaders for delegating up instead of empowering them to fail smarter and faster.

When an organizational culture has a dysfunctional response to failure it tends to slow things down on both ends of the innovation continuum. First, they become slow to begin new initiatives unless they are modest tweaks of the status quo. They often talk about bold projects but they get held hostage indefinitely to study groups and committees. I once heard it said this kind of committee is like a cul-de-sac down which good ideas are taken and quietly strangled.

On the other end of the continuum organizations become slow to eliminate failed programs. Often they have a history of success and have accumulated powerful stakeholders whose perspective on today's chronic underperformance is colored by the glory days of the past. So we prop them up, cover them with new coats of paint and explore new ways of measuring success to justify their continued existence. Eliminating an existing program is almost always more complicated of a change process than beginning

something new. But eventually the bandwidth of the organization is so stretched the most important step in pursuing what's next may well be eliminating a portion of what is.

So let me bring this to a close with a few questions. When was the last time you took the initiative to share with others outside your organization the important discovery you made about something you tried that didn't work? How often do senior leaders have to prod direct reports to "shoot straight" and give the "brutal facts?" What does this say about your organizational culture?

Think about a recent setback that you would describe as significant in the scope of your organization. What happened to the people who were leading it? How difficult was it for them to communicate the problems and how thoroughly were the causes mined for information that could help in the future?

NOTES

³⁷ Warren Bennis, *Geeks & Geezers* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2002) page 103

³⁸ *Harvard Business Review*, April 2011, Failure: Learn From It

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