

The secret of success – failure!

In the US they say business people don't really feel they have experience until they have at least one big failure behind them. **Ivan Robertson** considers the importance of experiencing failure and coping with adversity



Taking some risk is a must for successful management and leadership, even in the public sector



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For anyone in a management role some experience of failure is an important signal that they are not hiding in the “comfort zone”. Managers always have some degree of discretion about the level of challenge that they take on – and taking some risk is a must for successful management and leadership, even in the public sector.

A recent research study showed a positive relationship between the risk-taking orientation of top teams and the overall success of the enterprise. So taking risks can be important in a business context and may often lead to better business outcomes. But taking risks and working outside comfort zones also exposes people to higher levels of adversity and challenge than otherwise, so managers who cope with these experiences and learn from them become stronger and better – as Friedrich Nietzsche said: “What does not destroy me makes me stronger.”

In many respects, the way that managers deal with failure and adversity is more important than how they deal with success. So how is it possible to deal with failure and adversity successfully? The easiest place to start is to examine some extreme situations, where people have been faced with abnormally high levels of adversity. The important question is – when people do well, even in situations of extreme challenge and adversity, what is it that enables them to do so?

Denis Charney has studied people who have faced high-adversity situations over many years (including American service personnel in the Hanoi Hilton and survivors from 9/11). In fact, his “resilience prescription” is probably the best-researched and most comprehensive set of advice available. I’ve slightly adapted his prescription and use it often when discussing adversity and failure with leaders and managers.

- Maintain a positive attitude (looking backwards and forwards with realistic optimism)
- Be clear about your personal moral compass – resulting in a clear sense of purpose
- Find a resilient role model – actively finding one is important
- Face your fears
- Develop active coping skills – resilient people are always looking for new coping strategies
- Develop active cognitive flexibility – reframing. You can develop after stress, trauma and failure if you can frame it effectively from a cognitive perspective. In this context, failure and challenge are essential for personal growth and resilience
- Establish and nurture a supportive social network
- Look after your physical condition – exercise may be the “magic bullet” and provides the energy that fuels resilience.
- Develop/train regularly in multiple areas – we all have a basic need to be challenged and to master things

- Recognise and develop signature strengths.

I want to pick up on just a couple of the points from the resilience prescription; first, the ideas of optimism and cognitive flexibility. In some ways, of course, being optimistic and reframing events positively comes more naturally to some people than others – but both of these habits can be developed and strengthened. For example, when we fail the “attributional style” that we adopt is important.

Attributing failure to factors that are permanent (“I will always be bad at this”) and global (“It’s not just this – but all of these kinds of things”) mean that we feel much worse and less positive than if we see it as a temporary blip that is very specific to this situation. So, maintaining optimism relies on seeing failures as temporary and specific. Of course it has to be valid – if we don’t really believe, or are unrealistic about events, the resulting optimism will be fragile and unrealistic.

To get an idea of how reframing and positive attributions build resilience and optimism ask any top sportsperson or successful CEO to explain why they failed and listen carefully to what they say. Although they may blame themselves (an internal, rather than external attribution), they will almost certainly see it as temporary and specific.

The negative emotions that come into play strongly during adversity and failure tends to narrow the thinking and stimulate negative attributions even for the top performers, leaving them less able to cope and relish the next challenge. However, skills to prevent this can be taught and this is an area of development that the best leadership programmes are now starting to include.

Finally, I’d like to look at the key role that having a clear and strong sense of purpose plays in responding positively to adversity and failure. The fast-developing area of positive psychology focuses on the role that emotions – and, in particular, positive emotions play in human psychology.

In a very convincing research programme Barbara Fredrickson has provided support for her theory that positive emotions “broaden and build” our repertoire of behaviour and thinking, making us better able to cope, more hardy and resilient. She also studied people faced with extreme adversity and identified a powerful ingredient for people who did well even in extreme adversity:

“... finding positive meaning may be the most powerful leverage point for cultivating positive emotions during times of crisis.” (Fredrickson et al., 2003, p 374).

The important message is – don’t avoid adversity and failure – learn how to find meaning in them and deal with them successfully.