

Failure Leads to Success

“Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” — Samuel Beckett.

“Failure and fault are virtually inseparable in most households, organizations and cultures,” says Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management and co-head of the Technology and Operations Management unit at Harvard Business School. “Every child learns at some point that admitting failure means taking the blame. That is why so few organizations have shifted to a culture of psychological safety in which the rewards of learning from failure can be fully realized.”

The goal should be to detect failures early on, analyze them, and design curriculum or pilot projects to produce them. But if that methodology is ultimately to succeed, students must first feel a certain level of comfort with failure, as well as feeling safe enough to admit and report failures. This is almost counterintuitive to the standards we set for grades and expectations within our educational systems, but if we truly want students to succeed they need to understand that failure is the ultimate road to success.

Introduce failure

No matter the age of your students, explaining what failure means and its critical role in learning can be introduced. Use examples, such as falling off one’s bike, scoring poorly on a test or missing that winning goal as ways to begin to frame how those instances lead to self-actualization, redefined purpose and learning.

Create a safe zone

Develop exercises that acknowledge and accept failure as part of the overall process to success. Ensure students and parents understand that the exercises are designed specifically to provide a safe zone for failure. Consider visually showcasing the “safe zone” with [graphic labels](#), for the floor or [flags](#) for the area.

Continually reinforce

Failure is a daily occurrence, but our mindset is such that we view failure as something negative instead of as an opportunity. Continually reinforce the opportunities failure presents with creative [bumper stickers](#) for your students, in-class [banners](#) or custom [temporary tattoos](#).

Acknowledge your own limits

Set an example for your colleagues and students by encouraging them to follow your lead. Be open about mistakes you’ve made, admit when you don’t know the answer and be realistic about what you can and cannot do.

Invite participation

Amy Edmondson recommends embracing failure to diffuse defensiveness among peers and students by actively seeking input. Ask for observations and ideas, and create opportunities for people to detect and analyze failures in order to promote intelligent projects. Hand out [mood pencils](#) to reinforce the message that failure alters our behaviour and makes us more productive.

Our view of failure needs to shift. We need to embrace its benefits and expound upon its critical role in our path to success. As educators, you can begin to help alter viewpoints and pass along Winston Churchill's message that "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."

Edmondson, Amy C. "Strategies for Learning From Failure." Harvard Business Review Apr. 2011: 49-55. Print.

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