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Winning Failures

Turning Error into Opportunity

Insights from an international concert pianist and leadership consultant

By Orit Wolf

"Reward excellent failures. Punish mediocre successes" – this is how Australian businessman Phil Daniels, as quoted by Tom Peters, defined his leadership philosophy.

But what is a 'good' failure? How can we help people talk about failures openly without fear, and how do we teach them to approach mistakes? Is there an intelligent way to learn from failures that can be developed into a methodology? We all talk about successes but few talk about mistakes. We are often expected to do no wrong. And we are rarely taught what to do when a mistake actually happens, or advised about how to turn an error into an opportunity.

As a newspaper reporter, Walt Disney was fired because he suffered from 'lack of imagination'. Henry Ford lost his entire fortune five times before he succeeded in business. Abraham Lincoln lost three races for Congress and the Senate. Author John Grisham was declined by a dozen publishers and James Joyce received twenty-seven rejections. The Beatles were rejected by DECCA records and Igor Stravinsky had to leave town after the premiere of the _Rite of Spring_. Bill Gates never graduated from Harvard and Steven Spielberg failed to finish high-school.

What do all these visionaries have in common? Perhaps it is the passion of compulsion. They all had the ability to see failure as an opportunity to explore new options. These are also people whose critical thinking derives from within, rather than from the environment. They create their own life story rather than submit to rules and regulations. Their willpower and motivation are often higher than their actual capacities, but their aptitude and passion for exploration and improvement is far greater than achieving mere outcomes and results.

Some might argue that _obsession_ is also a crucial component for leadership, particularly when coping with obstacles and failures. It certainly has its power. On one hand, obsession is associated with fixation and endless repetition, but it could just as well be associated with true commitment, determination and strong will. People with 'obsessions' do not take no for an answer and they often treat failure as a step towards success. In his book Failing Forward John Maxwell describes failure as the price one pays for progress. He also differentiates between 'errors' and 'mistakes': _Errors become mistakes when we perceive them and respond to them incorrectly._

The Great Jazz player, Miles Davies, used to say: "Do not fear mistakes. There are none." I often wondered what he meant. Of course we all make mistakes in the performing arts, as well as in business. Yet, could we translate those 'mistakes' into practical opportunities that will lead us in new directions? Undoubtedly, alongside his reputation as an international trumpet player Davies was one of the greatest improvisers of his time,. I believe he was trying to say that rather than 'striving' for the one, perfect, faultless performance, we ought to shift our drive from impossible perfection to transforming 'mistakes' into new realms of sounds and meaning.

When I was twelve, I was invited to give a recital for the IBA radio, broadcast live from the Jerusalem Theatre. There were thousands of people in the hall and hundreds of thousands of radio listeners. After approximately ten minutes of solo playing I experienced the worst scenario a pianist could ever imagine. I had a total blackout, forgetting the music I had learned by heart. I remember I stopped playing and could only feel the tears on my cheeks before they dropped onto the black and white keys, and I also remember the extreme shame and fear I experienced. Obviously, every single listener recognized what was going on. At last, I managed to carry on and continue playing, but it wasn't the same. I lacked the joy and passion one needs in order to convey a strong message through playing.

It was then that I realized something essential – that in order to be in this demanding and risky performing business, I would have to adopt a new attitude, and to overcome difficulties with a new approach. I started taking improvisation lessons. It was a tough process for me. I had to learn the 'natural' acts of composition that children are often best at. I was always taught how not to make mistakes, but never learned what to do when mistakes actually occur. It took a tremendous amount of time and practice, but it was worth it. Improvisation is an invaluable tool for anyone who takes the stage.

Years later, while studying my Masters in London, my piano professor at the Royal Academy of Music told me: "If you do not practice one day – you will know it. If you do not practice two days – I will know it. If you miss three days – your audience will know it." Having a performing career is all about the never ending process of practice. But one can practice for months and still get it wrong. We do not 'game' the piano. We 'play' the piano, and it is in this verb that one perceives the whole philosophy of music making. It is not about winners and losers. It is about being in the experience of the present and its long lasting process. It is about experimentation, contemplation and the constant quest for improvement. You can never have a piece 'completely ready', as it is by definition in a 'beta'

state until played for an audience. A good example of this can be seen in the great pianist Daniel Barenboim, who has recorded the cycle of the 32 Beethoven *Sonatas* twice so far. The same goes for the Bach *Goldberg Variations,* recorded by Glenn Gould both in 1955 and in 1981. Both recordings were exquisite. There was no right or wrong performance. It was simply an attempt to present a new interpretation to the very same text. It has always struck me that they both made such an enormous effort to rerecord these monumental musical pieces. It is perhaps a sign of true art making and inner leadership.

But how can we take these insights of music making and stage training into the realms of business and leadership? Working with corporations on innovation, I am often captivated by the way managers cope with the 'unexpected'. This can range from a minor issue such as having to make a presentation without having a computer, to the greater challenges of coping with failures and faults, and of taking action once crisis occurs. Unfortunately, we are trained in a world of perfection, which is compounded by a culture of online 'fixed' results. It is difficult to be 'surprised' nowadays. We receive all necessary information before we make decisions. Anticipation is out. The more 'computerized' the world is, the less we tolerate mistakes. However, it is in the power of failures that we learn the patterns to succeed.

The following paragraphs suggest tasks and ideas to improve organizational performance through the tolerance for mistakes. It is up to the leaders to establish a culture of innovation that does not fear errors, but rather transforms the errors and their consequences into positive action.

A. Sharing 'Failures' Examples:

I often ask managers and employees to prepare and write their CV of 'failures'. Most of them are shocked by the request. It seems like a forbidden zone. Yet, by understanding your failures, you can come closer to your success patterns of success. I can personally attest to this: I have won a good number of international competitions, but I have lost many more. I vividly recall the days when I lost one competition, only to leave the following morning for the next. Negative feelings were not an option. I had to remember never to see myself as a 'failure' but rather review the weaknesses of my performance and learn from them. I used to analyze every aspect of each performance, from the physical environment to the actual choice of content and its order of playing.

There is a thought-provoking exercise one can conduct in every organization called the 'Spelling mistakes exercise'. The participants are requested to write what they hear instantly by the trainer – while making spelling mistakes on purpose. The results are intriguing. Most people find it almost impossible to make mistakes, even if they are well aware of the actual purpose of the exercise. The average result is X words and X/2 mistakes (i.e. 40 words/ 20 mistakes). Very few do more 'mistakes' than the amount of words. The exercise trains one in what Plato regarded as the *learning process*: the ability

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to break familiar patterns and build new ones instead. Most of us are afraid of stepping out of the norm and trying new habits. Yet, this is essential for the creative process. Relying on familiar comfort zones is perhaps the biggest enemy of generating new ideas and having innovative ideas.

If a leader is not afraid to admit his/ her own mistakes and talk about them freely, he will help other people within the organization feel more comfortable to share hidden stories. This model could lead to new problem-solving strategies for product development and in customer service.

B. Reward Innovation Differently

Innovation is everywhere. Leaders use this word too often and perhaps too easily. I often encounter organizations that encourage their managers and employees to generate new ideas. However, in most cases it works for a short period of time, after which most people resume their daily tasks, putting their creativity aside. The few organizations that do succeed are the ones who offer a consistent platform for innovation. In these companies, employees are given a certain percentage of working time to come up with creative solutions (like at 3M and Google), and they also set aside a budget to invest in the new ideas.

In other words, both parties – the employees and the management – are committed to innovation. Employees understand that their ideas will be seriously considered, and that they will enjoy both personal and professional reward if the ideas succeed. They are thus motivated to invest their time, effort and creativity, and their approach to work is more natural and joyful.

Music has taught me that actual playing is only one essential element of preparation. The other is the changing of the mindset to allow for creative performance and innovative interpretation

I often ask leaders I work with, as well as pianists in Master Classes: "how much are you willing to **pay** to experience your work?" This is counterintuitive and forces us to identify what elements of our work we receive the most satisfaction and fulfilment from. We generally approach work as a way to earn a living. Yet, if we were willing to 'pay' in order to experience these essential moments of work. This willingness indicates that we are there to lead and make an impact; and this is the key – the intrinsic feeling of reward is what enhances creativity and innovation.

C. Turning a Problem into a Solution and using the Absurd Technique

Several years ago, a large corporation I worked with was coping with a series of in-house problems. They had no control over employee internet use. People were spending time surfing the net, without any feelings of shame that they were supposed to be working. Managers tried different approaches to stop the practice but nothing helped. There was a sense of despair. I recognized their distress and made a suggestion to make the most unimagined 'request'. The idea was to use the components of the problem itself – meaning internet surfing – to solve the problem. They made the following announcement: "Every day, between 2:00‑3:00pm, no work is allowed. People can surf for personal matters only. If you are caught working at this hour, it will be considered as if you took the day off." It was a provocative and bold move, but the approach worked. People came to work with greater motivation, knowing that 'their' hour was just around the corner. True, they worked one hour less, but the overall output increased, as well as the professional results. This encouragement works with 95 % of employees – as most people choose to behave decently towards others. There will always be that five percent that continue internet surfing at all hours, but succeeding with 95 percent of the team should be considered a huge success.

Often we practice the piano very similarly. I will never forget how at the age of 10 I was trying to play the Beethoven *Moonlight Sonata* which has a delicate quality first movement. It felt like holding an expensive piece of crystal while walking on a slippery floor – the idea of hitting a wrong note or playing it too loudly was terrifying. Then my teacher stopped me and said: "Please push the chair away, stand up and play it very loud and very fast." "What? Why?" I protested. It sounded senseless and irrational, and went against the natural feel of the *sonata*. Yet, my teacher insisted that I do it. And after practicing it in this unconventional way, suddenly I was freed and was able to play the music softer and easier than ever before. It was at that time that I learned how music can be a microcosm of problem-solving, and can help shed new light on decision-making as well.

We are trained to believe that hard work alone leads to better results. Hard work is imperative, but there are other variables. Music has taught me that actual playing is only one essential element of preparation. The other is the changing of the mindset to allow for creative performance and innovative interpretation. It is fascinating to consider that life is also composed of people interpreting different texts according to their unique perspectives and talents.

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It reminds me of an electronic engineer I once knew. He was forty-two years old and lost his job during the 2008 global economic crisis. He spent many months trying to get a new job but had no success – he either received a negative response or no answer at all. His unemployment benefits stopped. His wife believed he should take any job, but he refused to think small. He was imbued with great conviction and passion for success. One day, he put three handwritten ads on the windows of his car and went for a drive. At first, fellow drivers thought the car was for sale, but they rubbed their eyes in disbelief when they read what was written: "A brilliant electronics engineer, 42, looking for a job." It was a simple, handwritten ad. Many who saw it decided they had to meet him, even if just out of curiosity. Within days, the engineer had dozens of interviews lined up, and soon had multiple job offers. He only had to choose the one he wanted. He was even interviewed by prime-time TV Channel 1 news. On the show, he said he had nothing to lose, and that the only strategy for his difficult situation was to be daring.

The proactive engineer was not hesitant to express a weakness. Publicizing his troubles in that surreal way was ingenious. He created a break of norms and paradigms both in his inner and outer world. The impact was enormous, both in his courage, creativity and in the concrete results. He ended up in his dream job.

Innovation is often generated by experiencing despair, whether it is the loss of a job, or having a blackout while being on stage as a concert pianist. Yet, bad moments are not the only impetus for innovation. Innovation can be practiced daily and embraced as a valuable tool for life, art and leadership. By rethinking the way we view failures and successes, and by separating the 'feelings' attached to them, one can deeply understand the patterns that lead us to behave the way we do. If we can just look closely at those 'black' moments, we can approach them positively and even transform them into an opportunity. As Winston Churchill said "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm."

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