



Teaching Success through Failure

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Abstract

Success involves learning from failure. This presentation will highlight the role of failure in preparing students for success by analyzing the "Constructive Action" education model at Metropolitan College of New York School for Business. This process involves students undertaking specific initiatives in the workplace to improve it. In the Constructive Action, a specific problem is defined, a plan of action is devised to solve the problem and then the success or failure of that strategy is analyzed. This last part documents what the student learned by the failure of plan A. If plan A has failed, the student would then propose plan B and so on. "Learning from failure" is thus intrinsic to this exercise. Many students worry if their plans should fail. They ask repeatedly if this will result in a bad grade. The answer is "no" - if they offer insight into the failure, what they have learned as a result of this failure, and then try to solve the problem again. At this point, data presented will help shed light on students' experience with the Constructive Action model used at MCNY. In our own teaching experience in a business school, we have seen examples in which students have learned from failure. For example, upon exploration of certain business concepts and also undergoing internships in a particular industry, a student may realize that he/she is not really interested in, or doesn't have the right personality for it. Some students might realize, after mathematical calculations and industry observations, that their business idea may not ultimately be viable. These realizations don't really constitute failure - they might even constitute success, because it is better for the student to learn earlier what they don't want to do and why, then to embark upon a large venture that will ultimately be wrong for them. We will examine other examples as well. What did these failures teach the student about the world of business, human nature, human relationships, etc.? How do these sorts of experiences and insights eventually lead to more successful ways of conducting business, improving workplaces, developing the right attitudes, etc.?

Keywords: Action learning, Failure, Success, Self-knowledge, Experientia;

1. Introduction: Success and Failure

The definition of "success" is a complicated philosophical question. We know that many people hold "success" as a basic life goal. But we know also that in many cases, success fundamentally involves learning from failure. This applies to everyone in all walks of life. It applies to all aspects of life as well, failed courses at school, interpersonal relationships gone wrong, divorces, misguided choice of occupation, work failures, mistakes in child rearing. But people generally fear failure, are embarrassed by it, and don't want to discuss it too much. They think it makes them look ineffectual, weak, or stupid. They therefore often downplay this essential connection and its relevance to their own lives. Perhaps there is too much emphasis, especially in capitalist societies, on achieving success, especially financial and professional success, and not enough on the lessons learned from failure. Failure is actually much more interesting, especially how it eventually gives us insights that help lead to success. There are many examples of business leaders, political figures, artists, etc., (and in fact everyday people) who failed in certain ventures before eventually succeeding (see Donnelly). Many important inventions, including the Cornflakes and Wheaties cereals (popular in the USA), and the pacemaker designed to treat heart problems, originated out of an inventor's failure to successfully create something else. It is important to see and analyze how we learn from our experience of failure. This presentation will explore this in greater detail.

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2. “Constructive Action” at Metropolitan College of New York

This presentation will highlight the role of failure in preparing students for success in their careers by analyzing the unique Constructive Action education model at Metropolitan College of New York. This presentation will discuss MCNY's "Constructive Action" based educational model, as it is relevant to this overarching theme of success and failure. This Constructive Action process involves students undertaking specific "real-world" initiatives in the workplace meant to somehow improve the workplace, their lives, and perhaps even the world at large (see Roosevelt, also Nufrio & Tietje). This process integrates theory (assigned readings) and practice for the students. The Constructive Action process involves a number of analyses, but the exercise fundamentally constitutes a problem-solving methodology. This is important because business, and life, is full of problems. Some problems we can solve, but not all. So it is important pedagogically to delineate and attempt to put into practice the steps in this process. In the Constructive Action, a specific problem is defined, a plan of action is devised to try to solve the problem and then the success or failure of that strategy is monitored for future improvement and possible change. This last part of the process documents what the student learned by the failure of plan A. If plan A in this problem-solving methodology has failed, the student would then try to propose a plan B, etc.

3. Learning from Failure as Intrinsic to the Constructive Action Project

“Learning from failure” is intrinsic to this educational exercise. Note that problem-solving is more difficult at every step than it might at first appear. For example, if a problem is misidentified, or is fundamentally unsolvable, this will affect how the "solutions" work out or not. If a problem-solving strategy is too ambitious for the student to undertake, this could also affect the outcome in a negative manner.

Some of the relevant components of the field-work (and problem-solving) part of the Constructive Action process are as follows. The student formulates a “Problem/Needs Analysis” which consists primarily of a description of the problem to be solved or situation to be improved, as well as a “Plan of Action” which offers alternative solutions to the problem. Plan A would be tried first. If that does not succeed, student would formulate and attempt to enact Plan B, and so on. The student also writes “Critical Logs” which involve a monitoring of the success or failure of the “Plan of Action”. In this section, the student discusses the following questions: Did the Plan succeed? Why or why not? What happened and what did not happen? What have I learned? What should be the next step?

Many students worry if their plan A (or even their plan B) should fail. They ask repeatedly if this will result in a bad final course grade. The answer is "no" – but only if they try to offer insight into the failure, what they have learned as a result this failure, and then try to solve the problem again. Or they may have to redefine the problem, or deal with a subset of the problem so that is more manageable. If students do not analyze failures and try to learn from them, they are in many cases doomed to fail again. Equally problematic is a situation in which someone is so paralyzed by the fear of failure that they never find the courage to embark on any new initiatives or attempt to change an existing bad situation. The famous line from Alfred Tennyson, “tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” illustrates the truth that it is often better to try and fail, than to never try because of fear.

Of course, no one wants to fail. And some failures –job loss, the end of a marriage, the failure of one’s business, etc., are serious and can have often long lasting negative effects on one’s life. The seriousness and the high stakes of some failures are clearly not factors to be minimized (see Hallmark). But we certainly do not want to keep repeating the same mistakes, as true failure ultimately consists in repeating the same mistakes without gaining insight on what was learned and how to change in the future. In the interpersonal realm, this also happens in relationships when neurotic behavior patterns are repeatedly enacted, without any insight into or change of the behavior patterns. Often an objective third party is needed to identify the underlying reasons for the blocked behavior and offer new approaches for the future. Similarly, business "consultants" are often called in to observe and try to fix struggling businesses because an objective third party is needed to properly identify problems and offer insights for the business to learn from to get on a more productive track.



4. Data/Examples from Student Projects in the Business School at Metropolitan College of New York

Data presented sheds light on students' experience with the Constructive Action model used at MCNY. In our teaching experience in this business school, we have seen many examples in which students have learned from failure. For example, upon exploration of certain business concepts, reading relevant literature and undergoing internships in a particular industry, some students realize that they are not interested in this industry after all. Some future entrepreneurs realize, after doing a number of mathematical calculations and industry observations, that their business idea may not ultimately be viable. These realizations don't constitute failure - they might even constitute success, because it is better for the student to learn early what they don't want to do and why, then to embark upon a large venture that will ultimately be wrong. Such experiences may be "wake-up calls" that later in life the students will be actually grateful for.

Consider also the following: a student's proposed marketing strategy did not work because the student blindly used the latest trendy social media application even though he was marketing to an older and therefore inappropriate demographic. He learned from this failure not to just follow the latest trends but rather to study and know one's demographic and to market to this demographic accordingly. In another case, a new idea for diffusing destructive workplace tensions simply backfired because of deeply entrenched employee personality conflicts. The student learned lessons about dealing with difficult people, a basic part of life. What did these failures teach the student about the world of business, human nature, human relationships, etc.? These sorts of experiences and insights eventually lead to more successful ways of conducting business, improving workplaces, developing the right attitudes, etc.

5. Success and Failure Revisited

Some people argue the entire emphasis on success is misguided because there are many examples of people who have had career success but are still not happy in their lives. Unhappiness might be due to confusion between means and ends, as Aristotle discussed. Some people achieve financial "success" and then wonder: "is this all there is?" Perhaps these people haven't lived balanced lives, and have thus achieved success in one area (work) at the expense of other important areas of life (their personal life). Or perhaps they have not experienced enough failure first. Failure may have a role in achieving happiness. Success often can feel unsatisfying without prior difficulties or experiences of failure. Just as one can't know day without first knowing night as a matter of contrast, success might be more satisfying, and result in more overall life happiness, if it comes as the result of some struggle, frustration and experience with failure, rather than if it just happens right away.

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