

# Why failure is vital to your success

**I**n the 1950s the Jacuzzi brothers invented a whirlpool bath to treat people with arthritis. Although the product worked, it was a sales flop.

Very few people in the target market – sufferers from arthritis – could afford the expensive bath. So the idea languished until they tried relaunching the same product for a different market – as a luxury item for the wealthy.

Very often the best way to test an idea is not to analyse it but to try it. The organisation that implements lots of ideas is likely to have many failures, but the chances are it will reap some mighty successes, too.

By trying numerous initiatives we improve our chances that one of them will be a star. As Tom Kelley of IDEO puts it, 'Fail often to succeed sooner.'

Honda entered the US market in 1959 with a range of low-powered motorcycles.

## Tips for success through failure

- ➔ Recognise and communicate that when you give people freedom to succeed, you give them freedom to fail, too.
- ➔ Distinguish between two kinds of failure – honourable failure where an honest attempt at something new or different has been tried unsuccessfully, and incompetent failure where people fail for lack of effort or competence in basic skills.
- ➔ Make sure people know that honourable failures will not be criticised.
- ➔ Get people to admit to or even boast about failures they have had where they tried something innovative that did not succeed.
- ➔ Make these into learning experiences. In a culture that is very risk averse and keen to apportion blame, take the issue head on by rewarding honourable failures. Publicly praise and reward those who have had them ❖

*In the UK we tend to look down on failure – but actually, it's vital to success. Paul Sloane looks at why it's so important to value our failures.*

It endured failure after failure as it learned the hard way that little bikes popular in the Tokyo suburbs were not well received on the open roads of the USA.

They eventually brought out a range of high powered machines that became very popular. Soichiro Honda, the founder of Honda, said: 'Many people dream of success. Success can only be achieved through repeated failure and introspection. Success represents the 1% of your work that results from the 99% that is called failure.'

## Failures mean better grades!

In order to develop the concept of the benefits of failure, Penn State University has a course for engineering students called Failure 101. The students have to take risks and do experiments. The more failures they have, the sooner they can get an A grade!

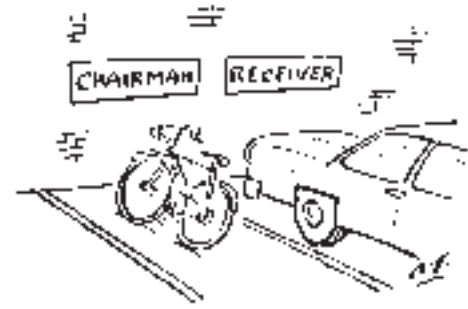
Many great successes started out as failures. 3M invented glue that was a failure – it didn't stick. But it became the basis for the Post-it note – a huge success.

Scientists at Pfizer tested a new drug called Viagra, to relieve high blood pressure. Men in the test group reported that it was a failure as regards high blood pressure but it had one beneficial side effect. Viagra became one of the most successful failures of all time.

Even if the failure does not lead directly to a success, it can be seen as a step along the way.

Edison's attitude to 'failure' is salutary. When asked why so many of his experiments failed he explained that they were not failures. Each time he had discovered a method that did not work.

Tom Watson Jr. was the legendary President of IBM, who led the company



through the high-growth years when it was the most admired business in America. He encouraged what he called 'wild ducks', people with unconventional, and sometimes disruptive, ideas.

## The \$10m education

On one occasion a Vice President who had lost the corporation \$10m on an experiment which failed was called to Watson's office. The VP was expecting to be fired, so he took his letter of resignation with him and presented it. Watson refused to accept it. 'Why would we want to lose you?' he said. 'We've just given you a \$10m education.'

In 1985 Coca Cola experimented by introducing 'New Coke' – a new flavour to replace 'Classic coke'. It had tested well in consumer testing, but it was a marketing disaster and flopped.

Did this great disaster do any long-term harm to Coca Cola? Probably not. It was an experiment that failed, but Coca Cola survived, learned and prospered. As Nietzsche put it: 'That which does not kill me makes me stronger.'

The innovative leader encourages a culture of experimentation. You must teach people that each failure is a step along the road to success.

To be truly adaptable, you must give people the freedom to innovate, the freedom to experiment, the freedom to succeed. That means you must give them the freedom to fail, too ❖

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