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Succeeding at Failure

Skills and Professional Development



We've all failed. You, me, babies, Michael Jordan, caterpillars, hermit crabs, Thomas Edison, and the rest of humanity. And failure hurts, whether physically or emotionally. But if we don't give up, failure eventually leads to success.

We are constantly trying to avoid pain and failure and save those we love from losing. As if success could come without its companions: pain and failure. These moments help us grow and improve.

Parents are wrong for protecting and cocooning their children, for fighting their battles and not letting them endure the very things that help them navigate the world. Schools and municipalities are wrong for creating playgrounds and parks where kids cannot swing, climb, hang, or fly. Employers are wrong for creating environments where employees are not encouraged to take risks, let alone fail in the process.

In our attempts to remove all the seemingly negative experiences from our lives, we also remove the ability to deal with the experiences that help us grow, adapt, create, and blossom.

Throughout our lives, we often want nothing more than for the challenging moments to be over. But in hindsight, we can recognize how those very experiences, rather than the moments of success, have shaped us into the people we've become.

What if the first experiences we had at taking risks and failing had been removed instead of celebrated? You wouldn't be walking, talking, reading, writing, and so much more.

When babies first start to walk, we do not yell at them and tell them to sit down. Or ask how dare you get up and try to move on your own two feet. No, we encourage and help them. When they fall, as

they inevitably will, we simply watch excitedly as they learn to balance on wobbly legs and feet, before they take those first awkward and halting steps.

No one would have told Michael Jordan to stop playing basketball after getting cut. Or to stop practicing hours each day perfecting his jump shots and free throws.

And no one would tell a caterpillar to stay a caterpillar when we know what it will become after it goes through its metamorphosis. Its process is painful, but the outcome is one of beauty and grace as the butterfly emerges and spreads its wings to take flight.

Even knowing these stages are necessary, we often want to eliminate the very processes and environments that accompany our own transformations and metamorphoses.

We have to be careful of being afraid of failing. There is nothing wrong with failing. Yes, it naturally includes the pain we feel from not getting what we want. But it is important to remember the pain we feel and the risks we've taken help us grow, so that next time we are better prepared to succeed.

Maybe you can relate to this scenario. There is a job you want in a new organization (or a promotion at your current one). You think about applying. There is a running dialogue in your head about not being good enough, having the right qualifications, experience, etc. Notwithstanding, you apply anyway. You get the interview.

You are happy and start to believe that maybe, just maybe you could get the job. The interview goes well and that belief grows. You walk away from the second interview convinced that the job is yours. Then reality hits when the notification comes that someone else was selected for the position. You are crushed. So... should you never have applied? Of course, you should have.

We are never going to get 100 percent of everything we want if we don't try. And even when we do, there are no guarantees. But there is so much to learn in the experience about the process and ourselves. Taking the risk is worth it. What we cannot do is internalize the outcome of goals that are out of our control. The lessons we can learn from this example are ones that in a healthy life we've been learning all along.

All we can do is put our best foot forward and, during a period of reflection, assess whether that was in fact what we did. Were we prepared? Did we study the company, the position, and convey our knowledge about them intelligently? If we did all we could do, then we have to accept and separate our egos from the outcome. We can either decide that it's not a failure or that it is, and that failure is good.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



Former ACC Docket Columnist

Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.