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Let Them Think, Let Them Fail

Skills and Professional Development



“Mistakes are the portals of discovery.”

James Joyce

We are a society that does not like pain. When we are in the midst of it we are looking for every opportunity to get through it as quickly as possible. We have taken the words of the Declaration of Independence that we have “the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” to mean that there is some sort of birthright to happiness. What we forget is that pain, challenges and heartache — the opposite of happiness — have a purpose. And shortcutting the process cheats us of those lessons.

Parents, in their attempt to protect their children from the harshness of life, never let their children experience the consequences of their actions or figure out how to deal with challenges. If it were only about saving them pain, that would be one thing, but it’s the benefits of pain that they are really being denied.

The same is true of bosses and managers in the context of micromanaging employees in an attempt to get the job done. All too often, in our haste to meet deadlines, we will not only tell people what we want, but how to do it. And then when they hit a roadblock, we are all too happy to give them the solution rather than letting them figure it out for themselves.

That approach is stifling and doesn’t lead to growth and the opportunity for those we lead to learn

how to think through challenges and solve their own problems. The result is they depend on us and over time, while we may not admit it, we hold that dependency against them, wondering why they cannot figure things out for themselves.

Growth is found in failure

When we don't give people the opportunity to fail, we prevent them from needing to think. Our greatest asset is an employee or committee member who is willing to bring their creative abilities to bear on the organization's problems and challenges. But it is not just about letting them think for themselves but also about creating an environment that encourages and demands risk taking.

Athletes, from junior to world class, have coaches, mentors and people helping them to grow and learn all the time. Why would we think it should be different in the workplace?

Of course one of the reasons is time. There is barely enough time to get the work that needs to get done completed, so adding on the extra responsibility of coaching staff through a learning process is often not high on the priority list. That is rather unfortunate because we often end up with a punitive environment where people are afraid to make mistakes, which means they will not put their best and creative thinking to the test. Any workplace or committee that is devoid of creativity is a dying entity.

So what can we do to encourage those we lead to think and if necessary fail? We can start by being clear about our expectations. However, we have to then leave the door open for how that outcome is achieved.

It will take extra effort on our part to be sure, but in the end, the investment we make up front in time and energy will more than pay off when we are freed up to handle other matters because we know the people who report to us can think for themselves.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



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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.