

What's wrong with failing?

Why is it that people are afraid of failure? Failure's not just part of life, it's *essential* to life – and to success. Henry Ford put it most eloquently: "Failure is the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently". You can't learn if you don't fail.

At an elementary school in Japan recently the parents objected to allowing just one child to be Snow White in the school play because it would make the others feel as though they were failures, so it ended up with 25 Snow Whites, no dwarfs and no wicked witch. But before we laugh at Japan, there is a concerted movement in the UK to do away with children winning or losing at sports days because we can't have anyone failing. Presumably we can't have races anymore unless perhaps there is a super-efficient handicapper who can ensure that everyone crosses the finish line together.

Anyone who thinks failing is bad should look at the serial failures of James Dyson and Thomas Edison. Dyson took five years building 5,127 prototypes of his first vacuum cleaner before he got it right. That's an awful lot of failures over a very long time, but the 5,128th model was a huge success. Edison claimed to have conducted 10,000 experiments before he made a light bulb that worked properly. But he also ended his life with 1,093 patents to his name and was a founder of General Electric, one of the most successful companies of all time.

The fact is that the more you fail – if you treat failure the right way – the more you succeed. The point is to turn failure into learning and not make the same mistake twice. Edison made notes after every one of his 10,000 experiments and made sure he didn't make the same error a second time. Michael Jordan, probably the greatest basketball player ever,

commented, "I've missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot...and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed".

Failure is an essential ingredient of innovation. It's impossible to get every new development right every time. Companies that are highly risk averse never develop breakthrough products and never create new markets. Organisations that punish failure end up with low-talent, low energy, responsibility avoiding people who expend most of their energy covering their backs and following hugely detailed bureaucratic procedures. These types of places strip people of pride and self-esteem.

Work is an integral part of life. It brings meaning to life. It's not accidental that one of the first things people ask when they meet strangers is "What do you do?" What we do in large part defines who we are. Organisations that strip people of the opportunity to be of worth – and ponderously bureaucratic organisations where rules, systems, procedures and processes determine virtually every action, and where there is no real opportunity for decision making, do this – do irreparable harm to them and to society.

While fear of failure can prevent people from doing various things, fear of success also gets in the way. We develop our self-concept from an early age and once it is formed it is difficult to change. We "know" what we can do – and can't do – so

sometimes when things are going really well and success is following success there is this little voice that starts saying "This is too good. I'm not that talented. I'm playing way above my head. I can't sustain this." And if you listen to the voice, of course you won't be that good and you won't succeed. People who play competitive games know all about this. To overcome failure you have to have a level of self-belief and tenacity.

How do you overcome failure? The first thing is to recognize that it's an essential part of success and that it's an opportunity to learn and improve. The second thing is to look carefully at every so-called failure to see what didn't work and what needs to be done differently. Why is it that the sporting world understands the indispensable nature of performance feedback but public service organisations and companies don't? Why does Tiger Woods spend hours practicing? He knows how to play any golf shot imaginable. And why does he have a coach with him while he's practicing? To adapt Bill Clinton's famous phrase about the economy, It's the feedback, stupid.

And the third thing you need to do to is to persevere. An old saying of the fur trappers of the far north was "The next mile is the only one a person really needs to make". But if a fur trapper's motto doesn't suit you, here's what Julie Andrews says: "Perseverance is failing 19 times and succeeding the 20th". How can you argue with Mary Poppins?

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strategy people performance

Penumbra is a strategic business consultancy. We bring clarity by using research to drive understanding and direction. We deliver success by balancing experience and innovative thinking.

Whatever your aspiration, we'll provide the tools, information and analysis to turn your strategy into operational reality, in a way that motivates your people to outperform the market.

Overview

As a strategic business consultancy, our expertise is in helping our clients executing strategies and delivering results.

We achieve this by combining a robust management planning system with a focus on people which drives alignment and commitment

We work in partnership with talented and committed leadership teams to help organisations build corporate value with a wide range of customised, cross-functional advisory programmes and services delivered from four complementary service groups:

Strategy

(Development, formulation, implementation and alignment)

Our innovative **Penumbra Balance** approach creates dynamism, drives and sustains momentum and makes strategy real for stakeholders

Organisational Development

(Behavioural issues)

We call our holistic approach **Balanced Motivation** which encompasses activities that improve performance both for the organisation and the individual

Research and Insight

Our stimulating **Clarity** approach draws on our business consulting skills to deliver a mix of business analysis and market research which

provides compelling insights for winning decisions.

Operations

The Operations practice brings all of our hands-on practical experience to bear on execution and delivery of results.

Our technology enabling approach called **Totality** facilitates business focussed services and solutions, aligned to business needs, for people, processes and tools.

Why Us?

Organisations turn to us when they:

- Want to find a new strategic direction
- Have created a strategy and now need to execute it
- Need to drive more value from existing initiatives
- Have a big issue to resolve, usually dependent on lasting employee buy-in
- Need to explore new ways to drive value
- Need a breakthrough result
- Are seeking measurable results

Our Experience

We have real world experience spanning 20 years with our clients. This includes working with:

BP, Citibank, Morgan Chase, WestLB, RBS, UBS, Bankers Trust, Kleinwort Benson, Coutts, Natwest, Intel, Nokia, Adobe, Kall-Kwik, Glaxo Smith Kline,

Dupont, Pfizer, Savills, British Council, Clifford Chance, British Airways, Gillette, Unilever, Shell, Volvo, Vauxhall, British Gas, TradeStation, MWB Business Exchange, Investors in People, University of Cambridge

On projects such as:

Strategic Planning, Strategy development and implementation, Culture change, Post-Merger Integration, Vision, Purpose and Values, Current State Analysis, Organisation Re-design, Transformational Change, Client Focus Strategies, Perception Studies, Client and Staff Engagement surveys, Global Rebranding, Know your Customer, Market Forecasting, Consumer Insight, Market Segmentation, Process optimisation, Lean/Six Sigma, Project Management, ERP Systems Roll-out, Market Research, Financial Modelling, Franchise Start-up Evaluation models, Cost Benefit Analysis, Implementation Alignment, Strategic Alignment, Complex Database development, Custom Application development, Supply Chain Optimisation

Covering diverse sectors such as:

Financial Services, Pharmaceuticals, Manufacturing, Energy, Mobile Telecoms, Travel and Tourism, Aviation, Property, Hi-tech and Business Services