Failure Leads To Success—# 5 of Eight Keys

Are you afraid of failure? Are our leaders afraid of failure? How do you fail and still be successful? As I was growing up, I had viewed myself as a failure. I had allowed society and the people around me to define me as a failure. Now that I am on the other side of these trials and tribulations, I have come to view these failures as a significant part of my learning. I am a better person for those learnings. The Harvard School of Business has noted that many of the richest men in the world have faced bankruptcy 3 - 7 times before becoming successful. Macey’s in New York is a good example of this. What is it with failure? No one seeks it out consciously.

Years ago Thomas Edison reframed the notion of failure. He made over 1100 successive tries before he was able to find the right filament to make a light bulb. He referred to each of these attempts as a series of tries, not as failures. Scientists conduct experiments in order to learn how to do something that has never been done before. Often scientists will redo an experiment to see if it can be done again following the same pattern. This is done to verify the procedure. However, when it is a new experiment, the scientist would change a variable to “give it a try.” This is why they call it an experiment. It is a series of attempts to learn something new.

At the point that Edison was famous, he was interviewed by a reporter who was quite facetious with him. The reporter sardonically asked Mr. Edison who was trying to make a storage battery, “How does it feel to have failed so many times at trying to make this thing?” Mr. Edison, with equal satire, responded, “Listen! I now know 1400 ways not to make a storage battery. What do you know?”

J.M. Barrie said, “We are all failures—at least, all the best of us are.”

In my 30-plus years of leadership experience, I’ve come to the conclusion that one of the most valuable but underestimated abilities that great
leaders possess is the ability to view failures as a series of tries to some greater learning. It’s more than having a good attitude about your mistakes, and it’s a step beyond simply taking risks. Failing to learn is a negative concept; however, to learn from your failures is the ability to get back up after you’ve been knocked down, learn from your mistakes, and move forward in a better and more learned direction.

Everybody makes mistakes! But the real difference between average people and achieving people is their perception of and response to failure. Nothing else has the same kind of impact on people’s ability to accomplish their dreams.

What do you dream of accomplishing? Unfortunately, no matter how gifted or knowledgeable you are, you will make mistakes along the way to your dreams. Failure is the price you must pay on the road to success. That’s just how it works. But the good news is that the better you are at learning from failure, the sooner you can accomplish your dreams with each new learning.

Before you put away your list of resolutions for this year, look at the following misconceptions about failure. Take an honest inventory to determine if your perception of failure is what it should be. If you share any of these misconceptions, add to your list the resolution to change the way you think about failure.

**Failure is unavoidable.**

You’ve probably heard the saying, “To err is human, to forgive divine.” That was written by Alexander Pope more than 250 years ago. And he was only paraphrasing a saying that was common 2,000 years ago, during the time of the Romans. Things today are the same as they were then: People make mistakes!

The notion that mistakes can be avoided is naive. It is wiser to accept that you will err, work on the thinking that reduces the error factor; and then,
continue to pursue your dreams. Errors are part of the learning curve to help you along the road to success.

The former mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani, in his book on Leadership (2002), wrote that he had planned with his central staff how to deal with emergencies should the city of New York fall under attack. He planned three different sites that emergency committee could move to direct emergency response. He knew that they needed a contingency plan for the contingency plan. At that time they were expecting an attack at the waterfront. As it turned out, they had to move their emergency response team to the third plan because of the dust and smoke and interference with the phone systems. He knew to plan for mistakes and errors in judgement (just in case scenarios.) Failure is unavoidable and to plan for it is the mark of successful leadership.

**Failure is not an event; but rather, part of the process.**
Think about your school days. If you or someone you knew received an F on a test, the tendency was to think that you failed at that moment. However, that’s not the case. The F shows that the test taker neglected the process leading up to the test and the result was a poor score. The truth is that you don't receive F’s for failing a test, but for failing to prepare for a test.

Failure is just like success—it’s a day-to-day process, not someplace you arrive one day. Failure is not a one time event, it’s how you deal with life along the way. Yes, you will make mistakes, but you can’t conclude that you’re a failure until you breathe your last breath. Until then, you are still in the process, and there is still time to turn things around for the better.

In my graduating year from University, there were three of us who achieved the top marks for our graduating class. We were the best of friends and often studied together. We learned that we all had something in common. All three of us had a great deal of difficulty in high school and had failed twice in our high school years. Somehow we learned how to be academically successful through our previous failures.
Failure is not always objective. More often than not, it is a matter of perception.

What determines whether an action is a failure? Sometimes people forget appointments or a critical task on a “to do” list or don’t quite see what needs to be done in order to be successful. How do you determine that action as a failure? Is it the size of the problem it creates, the amount of money your company loses, or how much criticism you have to endure? The truth is that you are the only person who can label what you do as a failure. Failure is often subjective. Your perception of and your response to mistakes determine whether they are failures.

An executive who had cost his company over a million dollars came to his CEO expecting to be fired. His CEO surprisingly said to him, “We have just spent a million dollars on your professional development. Do you think we want to lose you now?”

According to Tulane University business professor Lisa Amos, entrepreneurs fail in an average of 3.8 business ventures before they finally make it. They aren't deterred by mistakes or adversity because they don't see setbacks as failures. They recognize that three steps forward and two steps back still equals one step forward.

When I reached high school, I failed grade nine, repeated it, failed grade ten, and repeated it as well. Statistics show that students who get behind two grade levels typically drop out of secondary school. Many times these students report that they can’t do school and see little hope of success. So these students do what modern day counsellors refer to as ‘drop in to society.’

My guidance counsellor called me into his office for the first time in four years because I was not being very successful. He asked me, “What are you doing here?” I didn’t know what he meant so I intuitively asked, “What do you mean?” He repeated himself, “What are you doing here?” I said, “Well, you sent me this appointment slip so here I am.” He got annoyed and asked, “What are you doing in school with these grades?” I got really defensive and responded with humor as I often did to defend
my inadequacies. “Well sir, I am working on my silver pin.” He sat forward and furled his brow. He had these huge bushy eye brows somewhat like Graucho Marx which made it hard to take him seriously. He asked, “What do you mean silver pin?” Well that was the opener for me because I had used this joke to defend myself with other kids. I responded, “Well sir, if I spend two years in every grade to the end of grade 13, I will have spent ten years in high school and they should give me the Silver Pin Award.” He didn’t really know how to handle my humor and didn’t care to learn anything about me so his final response was to hurt me deeply. He said, in such a dismissal tone, “Well you should get out of school and get a job. You don’t belong here.”

Well, if that wasn’t enough hurt, he felt compelled to ask, “What do you think you are going to do with the rest of your life?” Again, using humor, I responded, “Well… I think I would like your job. It looks easy enough.” We never spoke again for many years.

At that time, I had a great deal of difficulty following advice because there was so little good advice out there. Thank goodness! So instead I went on in school to graduate and post graduate work with honors in three degrees. What I really needed was a little support and to be able to view these failures as what they were—stepping stones to learn how not to fail.

The irony to this story is that, later in life, when I received my credentials as a Guidance Counsellor, my ex-counsellor, who was the President of the Ontario Counsellors’ Association at the time, signed my Counselling Certificate. I framed it and placed on my office wall so that I would be reminded everyday of what not to do and say with my clients. Another corollary to this story is that I was selected to speak at the Canadian Counselling Conference in Ottawa and I saw my ex-counsellor sitting in the front row listening to my lecture. I don’t think he remembered me; however, there is such a great lesson here from failure.

One of the key lessons is to not let others determine your fate. You can accept others view of you as being a failure and then you become one.
Or, you can see what needs to be done and then go do it. If you view your mistakes as merely temporary lapses, and start using them as stepping stones to success, then you become a success.

Because of my failures in school, I believe that I became a better Counsellor and later a better in business as a facilitator of Mentor, Coach and Leadership Training Programs. I became more empathetic to clients who struggled and became more intuitive in how to help them move forward. My failures had a purpose in my growth.

**Failure is not the enemy. If you are open to possibilities, failure is merely a series of tries.**

Most people try to avoid failure like the plague. It’s not unlike facing change. They’re afraid of it. It is said that the only person who likes change is a wet diapered baby. However, if you never cross the road, you will never know what’s on the other side. Now I know that these clichés are overused in literature; but somehow I feel the urge to help people move forward and oftentimes these anecdotes, metaphors and clichés create an image for the reader/listener to understand what is needed to face the challenges of change and to take the necessary risks, face failure on a path toward some greater success.

It takes real adversity to create success. NBA coach Rick Pitino says, “Failure is good. It’s fertilizer. Everything I’ve learned about coaching I’ve learned from making mistakes.” Time and time again in sports against all adversity athletes have faced the threat of failure in order to succeed. Spud Web at 5’7” tall won the NBA slam dunk competition. Wayne Gretzky was told he was too small and too slow a skater to make it in pro hockey. He became the “Greatest.” Michael Jordan once said, “I’ve missed more than 9000 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 again in my life and that is why I succeed.” Success just isn’t as sweet without a little failure.
Thomas Watson, founder of IBM, said that, “If we want to increase our success rate, we need to increase our failure rate. 70% of our ideas should be wrong.” Begin to perceive mistakes as opportunities rather than opponents.

Dr. Wayne Dyer in his presentation on, The Power Of Intent, says that, “It is alright to take risks and fail as long as you are trying.” If you don’t try, you are doomed to failure. If you do try, you have increased the opportunities for success. To steal an expression from baseball, “You have to step up to the plate.”

**Failure doesn’t have to be irreversible unless you are a brain surgeon. Learning from mistakes allows you to change the future. See the bigger picture.**

There’s an old saying in Texas that goes: “It doesn't matter how much milk you spill as long as you don't lose your cow.” In other words, mistakes are not irreversible. The problems come when you see only the “spilled milk” and not the bigger picture.

Tom Peters wisely acknowledged, “If silly things were not done, intelligent things would never happen.” When you make a mistake, keep things in perspective. Understand that on the heels of every mistake is a valuable lesson and another opportunity to improve.

Washington Irving once noted, “Great minds have purposes; others have wishes. Little minds are subdued by misfortunes; but great minds rise above them.” If you tend to focus on the extremes of mistakes and fixate on particular events in your life, make a resolution to gain a new perspective on failure. See errors and negative experiences as a regular part of life and determine to learn and grow from them. If you can do that well, you may find that your dreams are much closer than you think.

Leo F. Buscaglia said, “We seem to gain wisdom more readily through our failures than through our successes. We tend to think of failure as the
antithesis of success, but it isn't. Success often lies just the other side of failure.” See failure as a step to moving forward.

Instead of dropping out of school as the statistics predicted, I remained in school only to follow a thirty year career in counselling and a successful business career in Mentor, Coach and Leadership Training. Through these careers, compassion and understanding of failure, I know that I was able to support many clients toward their individual paths of success. Each of my failures was a part of a larger design to support others in creating their own success. **Now that is success!**

This is the “Failure Leads To Success Key” for true success in life. This is the fifth of “Eight Keys For Success In Life.”