

Want to be a Success? Celebrate Failure!

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Leadership Wired

Failure is not an option.
Gene Kranz, Apollo 13

Unless you're skydiving, tightrope walking, or trying to land a space shuttle, failure IS an option. In fact, the most successful people usually are the ones who have failed the most. Unafraid to take risks, they stumble frequently, but in doing so they learn valuable lessons and improve themselves.

Consider Google. The California-based firm revolutionized Internet search technology and Internet advertising, and it has created a host of innovative tools such as its mapping service (Google Maps), email platform (Gmail), web browser (Google Chrome), and mobile phone operating system (Android).

But spectacular successes rarely come without spectacular failures. The company massively misfired with Google Wave, a web application designed to integrate email, social networking, and instant messaging. On August 4th, Google announced its decision to shut down the high-profile project, not even a year after its launch. In explaining the decision, Google CEO Eric Schmidt asserted the company's attitude toward the situation:

"We celebrate our failures. This is a company where it's absolutely okay to try something that's very hard, have it not be successful, and take the learning from that."

Celebrating Failure

Leaders set the tone for how their people view failure. In particular the stance leaders take toward failure affects an organization's tolerance for risk, openness, creativity, and teamwork. With so much at stake, how can leaders create a culture in which failure is celebrated rather than feared?

1) Encourage Risk-Taking

Leaders invite their people to take risks when they entrust them with the authority to make decisions and the responsibility to exercise their own judgments. People who are empowered to act without having to seek the approval of higher-ups may misstep occasionally. Yet, in the long run they'll learn invaluable lessons and gain confidence in their own abilities.

2) Set Expectations

Leaders de-stigmatize failure by setting the expectations that, from time to time, people will mess up. Instead of insisting on perfection, seasoned leaders simply desire progress. They concern themselves with effort rather than focusing only on outcomes. To this end, they don't punish failure; they welcome it as a natural part of life and a necessary step in the process of maturing as a leader.

3) Interpret Setbacks

Some people are their own worst critics. After making a mistake, they have trouble recovering and moving on. Leaders come alongside their teammates to help them interpret failure. Instead of equating an error with disaster, leaders point to the slip-up as a portal of discovery. They frame failure as a learning opportunity and use it to instruct and guide team members.