

THE UNCOMFORTABLE PATH TO SUCCESS: LEARNING FROM FAILURE

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***“You have to work at what you’re not good at...
Human beings resist exposure and critique; our brains are
well defended.”
- Atul Gawande***

Confronting our own mistakes is never easy. It is possibly an even harder task at work. But does the value of exposing oneself to scrutiny and fault-finding outweigh the inevitable discomfort?

Atul Gawande is Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School and an acclaimed medical writer. Despite his vast experience, Gawande observed that he had reached a plateau in his work. Over the course of a decade he had performed more than two thousand specialist operations, yet data showed that he was no longer improving his surgical outcomes. Gawande decided to invite another expert to critique him as he performed surgery, to look at what worked, but also at what didn't. The feedback gleaned from that process enabled him not only to improve his performance significantly, but also to understand other critical areas of medicine where things go wrong - and to learn why.

Recent studies of outstanding performers at work have consistently shown that those who achieve the greatest success adopt an unusual approach towards failure: they examine and determinedly learn from it. One of the key skills developed by experts across different sectors is that of self-observation, which includes studying their own mistakes and seeking feedback to inform their learning. This takes both dedication and willpower - and is in stark contrast to what can happen after years of experience in any field of work: reaching a plateau and operating on autopilot, ignoring inevitable missteps along the way. What differentiates both individual and corporate high achievers is the capacity to assess and analyse where things have gone wrong.

There are a growing number of well-known organisations that examine mistakes as well as successes. The hedge fund Bridgewater operates a policy of 'radical transparency', implemented by its founder Ray Dalio. This requires its employees to recognise, study and give honest feedback on errors and faults, including work skills. Dalio believes that "learning comes from making painful mistakes and then reflecting." Multinationals such as Amazon, Netflix and Coca Cola also famously approach failure as a strategic learning experience, where success derives from the knowledge that follows numerous missteps. Harvard University runs a 'Success-Failure Project', whose mission is to explore achievement, failure and resilience. What all of these initiatives have in common is that they de-stigmatise failure, foster coping skills, and encourage creative learning and growth.

However, managing uncertainty and recognising that we sometimes get things wrong does not always come naturally. This particularly may be the case for lawyers, where seeking the right answer and reaching a successful result is at the core of one's role. There may be significant anxiety in acknowledging failure and admitting mistakes - within organisations as well as for the individual. It is inevitably uncomfortable and evokes an emotion we rarely admit in the workplace: vulnerability. There may also be a sense of wasting past investment, sunk costs and time. But if we want to improve, we must be willing to acknowledge our weaknesses, accept criticism and make efforts to change, even if that pushes us outside our comfort zone. It is at that point that the most creative thinking and significant learning happens.

The upside is that this process allows us to improve and even excel at our work, while building resilience and valuable self-awareness. It might also temper the 'tyranny of the positive' in the workplace where, most often, only achievements and successes are given air. Maturity at work comes, as Gawande notes, when we are ready to "confront the uncomfortable difficulty" that even experts have flaws and make mistakes.

Key benefits of acknowledging and learning from failure:

- Fosters resilience and the ability to tolerate setbacks - both necessary skills in demanding workplaces.
- De-stigmatises mistake-making, allowing individuals to ask for help and encouraging transparency.
- Tackles issues such as perfectionism and 'imposter phenomenon', both prevalent amongst highly successful individuals.
- Develops self-awareness and self-observation, as well as creative and lateral thinking.
- Enables significant personal and professional growth and improved performance.

Permission to fail - how to learn from our mistakes:

- Seek to develop the skill of critical self-observation.
- Starting at the individual level, recognise that failure and mistake-making are an inevitable part of life and work.
- Acknowledge that developing new work skills involves some trial and error, both of which are crucial to growing expertise.
- Learn to listen carefully and ask open questions to understand better when things go wrong. This can be employed one-to-one, in teams and wider groups, and should include time to reflect on and analyse mistakes and lessons learned.
- Be patient and compassionate – both with oneself and/or with those involved in the process; it takes time to learn to tolerate the emotions involved and to allow the knowledge gleaned to be put into action.

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