

# Aperius Consulting

## EMBRACING THE POWER OF FAILURE

### Summary:

- Failure isn't necessarily a bad thing.
- Often, failure is a sign that somebody is 'engaging' with life – trying new things and exploring what's possible.
- Failure has some key benefits, including:
  - It builds experience.
  - It creates new opportunities.
  - It builds perseverance.
  - It drives creativity and innovation.
  - It builds 'esprit de corps'.
  - It aligns with a dynamic business environment.

## A SECRET TO SUCCESS – EMBRACE THE POWER OF FAILURE

*Roger Alderson, Aperius Consulting*

Once every year, thousands of UK students dread a period of their lives known as A-Level results week. For those outside the UK who don't know what this means, it's when high-school students receive their final grades – grades that will determine what direction their lives will take over the next few years. For some the results will be as expected and they'll continue on the same path that they've been traveling for the last several years, most likely towards university. For others the results will not be as expected and they'll be forced to re-think their future.

A small number of students will be facing grades that are significantly lower than they were hoping for. For them, the world can look pretty dark – especially if this is their first taste of (meaningful) failure.

*Failure isn't  
(necessarily) a bad  
thing*

But, while it might be a set-back (and is always an unpleasant experience), failure isn't necessarily a bad thing. In some instances it can be a *good* thing. In the instance of A-level results it could indicate the subject was wrong for the student, or the teaching standards were inadequate, or the study approach was flawed, or the entire learning system wasn't suitable. All of these possibilities can be reviewed, analysed and then used to define a different path – one that is more suitable, perhaps even ultimately preferable.

Even if the new path isn't preferable it's worth noting that people who don't occasionally fail are either not trying or lying. Assuming that you 'engage' with life, some failure is inevitable. I would contend that people who accept the concept of failure are ultimately more successful than those who don't.

- **They build essential experience and expertise.** Every failure is an opportunity to learn. Taking the time to analyse what went wrong provides valuable (perhaps even essential) insight. Even with the benefit of listening to the experience of others there's no substitute for the learning power of trial and (occasional) error.
- **They create opportunities.** It's an absolute fact that not trying something means that there is a zero probability of success. A willingness to try means that there is (at least) a chance of success – and potentially great success. Risk aversion forces people to remain in the 'safe' zone and settle for what they know they can achieve. It's true that these people rarely fail, but they're not particularly successful either.
- **They build perseverance.** It's extremely rare that success comes easy. It typically takes effort. Accepting an environment in which failure is possible, perhaps even probable, builds

perseverance. People with perseverance learn to 'stretch' – trying that little bit harder than everybody else. They know that failure today is the basis for success tomorrow and they don't roll over and give up as soon as they're faced with a challenging situation.

- **They foster creativity and innovation** in themselves and in those around them. People who aren't afraid to fail liberate themselves to come up with amazing ideas far beyond normal boundaries. Often, simply trying something surfaces new concepts that can be refined into success. It's common for people to stumble into breakthrough success in one area through active failure in another.
- **They enhance esprit de corps.** A willingness to fail changes team dynamics for the better. It reduces stress and encourages collaboration, even if only to share the risk. In most team environments, failure to achieve the ultimate goal isn't acceptable. But a willingness to fail on the path to the ultimate goal – measured failure – creates an environment in which people are happier and perform correspondingly better.
- **They align with today's business environment.** When failure isn't tolerated, people tend to work within recognisable boundaries or hold back and plan. Planning becomes ingrained and time-to-action is minimised as people strive to consider all possible eventualities. But, today's business environment is highly dynamic where it's (frequently) better to try something, assess the impact, adjust the approach and then try again. I call it Multi-Failure-Driven Success – MFDS.

*Failure is a necessary part of life. If you don't fail (sometimes), then you're not really trying.*

These are six reasons why I think people who embrace failure are ultimately more successful than those who don't. But there's another reason to accept the possibility of failure: it makes life more fun. Toleration of failure and a willingness to 'give things a go' makes life infinitely more interesting and satisfying.

Just in case you don't believe that failure can breed success, here's a list of a few famous failures.

- **Babe Ruth** – held the record for the most strikeouts (1,330). He was once asked about this and said, "*Every strike brings me closer to the next home run*".
- **Michael Jordan** – missed an estimated 9,000 shots in his career. He lost around 300 games and, on 26 occasions, was entrusted to take the game winning shot... and missed.
- **Albert Einstein** – didn't speak until he was four and didn't read until he was seven. As a child he was generally viewed as slow and anti-social. He was expelled from school and was refused admittance to Zurich Polytechnic.
- **Harland David Sanders** – suffered rejection of his secret chicken recipe 1,009 times before a restaurant finally accepted it. With annual revenue of \$23bn, Kentucky Fried Chicken is now the

world's second largest restaurant chain (after McDonald's) with 18,875 outlets in 118 countries.

- **Walt Disney** – was fired by a newspaper editor because he "lacked imagination and had no good ideas". His first animation company went bankrupt, and it's rumoured that he was turned down hundreds of times when he sought financing for Disney World.
- **Soichiro Honda** – was turned down for a job with the Toyota Motor Corporation, leaving him unemployed. He started making (and selling) scooters from his home. Honda is now the largest manufacturer of internal combustion engines (measured by volume) and has been the largest motorcycle manufacturer since 1959.
- **Fred Smith** – submitted an idea to his college business management class that received a failing grade. The idea (FedEx) went on to become one of the most successful package delivery companies on the planet.
- **Mark Cuban** – failed at a series of jobs (carpenter, cook, waiter) on his way to success – ultimately selling Broadcast.com to Yahoo. He's quoted as saying, *"I've learned that it doesn't matter how many times you fail. You only have to be right once"*.
- **Evan Williams** – founded Odeo before co-founding Twitter. It was a slick podcasting platform but at around the same time, Apple launched the iTunes store. iTunes had a robust podcasting platform and soon pushed Odeo into obsolescence. Despite predictions of the impending demise of Twitter, estimates of Williams's current net worth are unreliable, but are almost certainly measured in billions of dollars.
- **Richard Branson** - has presided over a hugely successful business empire, especially the flagships - Virgin Records and Virgin Airlines. But there are other Branson ventures that have been considerably less successful, for example: Virgin Cars, Virgin Cola, Virgin Brides, Virginware, Virgin Pulse, Virgin Express, Virgin Vie and Virgin Vodka.

## Summary

So, don't be afraid to fail. Life is shorter than you think. Get out there and give it a go.

Instead of being afraid of failure, embrace it!

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