

# **HOW FAILURE IS A LEARNING GROUND FOR GREAT LEADERSHIP**

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# Property investor and career coach Steph Brown on how failure is a learning ground for great leadership

*Formerly in senior marketing positions at Nike and Apple, Steph Brown has learned to embrace the learnings of failure over the course of her career. Here she explains how adopting this all-important mindset for yourself will see you grow as a leader.*

## **Could you give your take on where this idea that failure can actually be a force for positivity might have come from? Is it, perhaps, a response to other societal or business phenomena? Or/and perhaps linked to the greater emphasis on emotional intelligence that we're seeing in society?**

The idea has come from a very simple place: experience. Failure as a force for positivity is the result of people failing and the realisation that it is the single biggest factor in success. Failure being a positive thing is not a new idea. Go back 100 years and you will find example after example of people/organisations/countries turning a failure into a success. The bigger issue lies in our attitude towards failure. Despite constant examples of failure being the platform for success, we continue to attach a negative stigma to the experience. And as a result people continue to fear and avoid failure - despite rational examples that it is not something that needs fearing if you are looking to ultimately achieve great success.

## **How have you personally come to form a relationship with the idea?**

In 2013 I left a company I had worked for for 8 years – a job I loved in one of the world's biggest sports brands – to take a chance on a small London start-up. The gamble didn't pay off. Three months later I was fired and spent 8 months looking for my next job.

The experience was heartbreaking and crushed me both mentally and emotionally. But when the dust settled and I finally found a new role it was so much more amazing that the role I had been fired from. It was a better brand, a much larger salary, a better team, better location, better office! Everything was better.

This wasn't the first time this had happened to me. I was also fired from a job when I was 24 and I had the same experience. After 3 months of job hunting and working in a role I hated, I ended up with my dream job, working for one of the coolest brands on the planet.

Both experiences taught me that failure is not the worst thing that can happen to you. In both cases it was actually the best thing that could possibly have happened to my career. The place I ended up and the life I built after both of those failures was so much more amazing than I could ever have imagined.

## **What impact has the idea had on your own life and career?**

Having experienced failure in my career multiple times and realising that it was the best thing that could have happened, not only to my career but my life, I keep that experience in my mind

whenever I'm trying anything new. Ultimately I probably take chances way more than I would have if I hadn't had these experiences. Knowing that failure has been a driving factor in the success I've had in my life, I feel more confident moving forward into the unknown, with the reminder that everything will be OK, even if you fail.

## **Have you seen any other leaders engage with the idea? Could you give examples?**

I think it's always difficult for leaders to overtly embrace failure, due to the negative stigma that is attached to failure. Many companies will not appreciate leaders embracing failure as they will see this as risky for the company. However, if the leader works for a smaller company or is a founder, then the ability to embrace failure and encourage others to embrace it will be increased. Silicon Valley, for example, has a culture where start-ups embrace failure as a platform for success – in fact, Silicon Valley probably goes too far in the other direction! Failure as part of company culture will impact on whether leaders are truly given free reign to embrace the idea.

Most leaders, if they have succeeded in their careers, will have experienced failure on the way to success and therefore hopefully have some positive experiences from it. Personally, for me as a leader, I think it is important to allow those you lead to know they are ok to make mistakes. If you lead a team that are too scared to try anything, you will achieve nothing of great significance. And if you don't allow failure from those you lead, they will never learn and grow. Those who do not learn and grow become bored and unmotivated. This is not the team you want to lead either. Failure as a growth mechanic allows people you lead to become better at what they do and ultimately your team will be happier in their work.

## **Have you had experience of trying to communicate the idea to others? How has that panned out?**

It's always difficult to convince other people of the merit of failure if they have never experienced it themselves. You have to go through failure – face the fear – to overcome the stigma. Sharing my examples with other people helps. By most conventional standards, my career has been very successful. So people are always surprised to learn I've been fired twice. Being open and sharing this experience with others helps to show that failure can be a force for good. But it is still difficult for people to understand if they haven't experienced it. Rationally people know that failure can be a good thing. But human beings are irrational and we like to avoid anything that can cause us pain. Failure is pain first, pleasure later (if you take the lessons learned and apply them). And most human beings don't like to take the pain first. So 'failure is a good thing' is always a hard sell.

## **What about the (devil's advocate) argument that by reinterpreting failure, we're hoodwinking ourselves and other people?**

I don't believe that seeing failure as a positive thing is 'reinterpreting failure'. It is a subjective opinion that failure is negative. For some people, myself included, they see failure only as a positive and an opportunity to learn and grow.

The simple fact is that every person who has succeeded in any significant way, in whatever aspect of life you deem to be important, has taken risks and failed in some way before great success came. No one is born knowing how to do things. We have to learn. And to learn, we must first fail.

Babies trying to walk first fall over. Teenagers with their first crush often get their heart broken. University students looking for jobs often miss out on the ones they want. CEOs running companies often make mistakes. These are all lessons we learn from.

There is nothing to be 'hoodwinked'. Failure is the basis for success. Human beings are designed to learn and grow, and part of that process is failure. It then comes down to the individual to decide if failure is ultimately good or bad – but it is subjective.

## **Is there a demographic that would benefit more than others by engaging with this idea?**

I don't think one's approach to failure is determined by demographic. Individuals interpret failure their own way, usually based on their previous experiences with failure. If people have experienced failure and it has formed the basis for success, their attitude towards it will be more positive than someone who experienced failure and allowed it to destroy them. And it is a choice. Your interpretation of any situation, including failure, is a decision you make. You can choose to grow and learn or you can choose to let it negatively impact you. Like everything in life, it is a choice.

Therefore I don't think any one particular demographic would benefit from this idea. All human beings would be more positively impacted if they choose to see failure as a positive experience from which to learn and grow.

## **Does one's capacity to engage with the idea depend on what 'type' of person you are?**

Like anything in life, everyone is an individual and their approach to the world is unique to them. If you are a 'glass half full' person, I would imagine you are more likely to see the positives in any situation, including failure. If you are 'glass half empty', I would imagine failure has the ability to bring you to your knees.

But as I said above, your attitude toward any situation in life is a choice. No matter what personality type you are, you can choose to see failure as a positive and a platform from which to learn and grow.

## **Is there a link between this idea and disruption? Zuckerberg's 'move fast and break things', for instance.**

Embracing failure ultimately leads to more risk taking. Which could be seen as similar to 'move fast and break things'. Having said that, I don't think people (especially leaders) should be recklessly going after failure. It is still possible to push outside your comfort zone and take risks (some of which will result in failure) without being completely reckless. In leadership roles, you are often

dealing with human and financial resources. You don't want to recklessly take risks with people's lives or finances that are not yours. Therefore a good leader will know how to take calculated risks. They will know that there is a chance of failure. But that any failure can be a platform for future success. However, they don't have to be reckless as the Zuckerberg quote can sometimes suggest.

## **Can you give some pointers for leaders wanting to reinvent their own relationship to failure? How can it supercharge their leadership?**

The best way to get comfortable with failure is to take risks and fail in your risk-taking. Experience and learning is the best way to reinvent your relationship with failure because no amount of coaching or theory will replace experience. You have to face failure head on and not be afraid of it, in order to change your relationship to failure.

As a leader, it is also important to allow your team the space to fail. Giving your team the support to know they are in a 'safe' space where risks can be taken even if they result in failure, shows a confidence in leadership. A confident leader knows that any failure their team experiences can provide the platform for greater success in the future, but it is only a confident leader who can do this. Create an environment where your team not only feels they can take risks but feels supported when the risks don't come off and you really supercharge your leadership.

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