

LEARNING FROM FAILURE - REFLECTION



I ask for what I desire as we begin this topic



I pray that my entire being become open to God's grace



I imagine these texts being addressed to me, and note my response

Grace: to find meaning in failure and see in our mistakes a space to experience growth and mercy

“Challenges make us uneasy. In the area of risk, I think we have to pay particular attention to how we value success. I think the feeling of success has been one of the toughest enemies we have to fight against. True, success can be something we thank God for. But it can also be a great temptation, as when we feel we should remain where we are not needed only because we have been successful, or when we do not undertake any risky task because we fear we might end in failure. Well, Jesus’ life ended in failure. We celebrate success all the time. I do not know yet of a single religious community which has celebrated failure for the kingdom of God.”

Conversation with Fr. Adolfo Nicolás on January 19th 2009 on Common Apostolic Discernment.

“We are not asked to ignore or hide our wounds. A Church with wounds can understand the wounds of today's world and make them her own, suffering with them, accompanying them and seeking to heal them. A wounded Church does not make herself the center of things, does not believe that she is perfect, but puts at the center the one who can heal those wounds, whose name is Jesus Christ.”

“God’s people neither expect nor need us to be superheroes. They expect pastors, consecrated persons, who know what it is to be compassionate, who can give a helping hand, who can spend time with those who have fallen and, like Jesus, help them to break out of that endless remorse that poisons the soul.”

Excerpts from the address of Pope Francis to Chile's priests, religious, consecrated persons and seminarians gathered in the Cathedral of Santiago - Full Address [Here](#)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do the above words speak to me? What invitation do they carry for my experiences of failure?

"I have always liked the way the Gospels do not adorn or soften things, or paint them in nice colours. They show us life as it is and not as it should be. The Gospel is not afraid to show us the difficult, and even tense, moments experienced by the disciples.

Let us reconstruct the scene. Jesus had been killed, but some women said he was alive (Lk 24:22-24). Even after the disciples had seen the risen Jesus, the event was so powerful that they needed time to be able to understand what had happened. That understanding would come to them at Pentecost with the sending of the Holy Spirit. The encounter with the Risen Lord would require time to find a place in the hearts of his disciples.

The disciples go home. They go back to do what they knew how to do: to fish. Not all of them, but only some of them. Were they divided? Fragmented? We don't know. The Scriptures tell us that those who were there caught nothing. Their nets were empty.

Yet another kind of emptiness unconsciously weighed upon them: dismay and confusion at the death of their Master. He was no more; he had been crucified. But not only was he crucified, but so were they, since Jesus's death raised a whirlwind of conflicts in the hearts of his friends. Peter had denied him; Judas had betrayed him; the others had fled and hid themselves. Only a handful of women and the beloved disciple remained. The rest took off. In a matter of days, everything had fallen apart. These are the hours of dismay and confusion in the life of the disciple. There are times "when the tempest of persecutions, tribulations, doubts, and so forth, is raised by cultural and historical events, it is not easy to find the path to follow. Those times have their own temptations: the temptation to debate ideas, to avoid the matter at hand, to be too concerned with our enemies... And I believe that the worst temptation of all is to keep dwelling on our own unhappiness. Yes, dwelling on our own unhappiness."

(...) The nets – the disciples say – are empty, and we can understand their feelings. They return home with no great tales to tell; they go back empty-handed; they return disheartened. What became of those strong, enthusiastic and elegant disciples who felt themselves chosen and had left everything to us follow Jesus (cf. Mt 1:16-20)? What became of those disciples who were so sure of themselves that they would go to prison and even give their lives for the Master (cf. Lk 22:33), who to defend him would have liked to send fire upon the earth (cf. Lk 9:54). For whom they would unsheathe their swords and fight (cf. Lk 22:49-51)? What became of that Peter who reproached the Master about how he should live his life (cf. Mk 8:31-33)?

It is the hour of truth in the life of the first community. It is time for Peter to have to confront a part of himself. The part of him that many times he didn't want to see. He experienced his limitation, his frailty and his sinfulness. Peter, the temperamental, impulsive leader and saviour, self-sufficient and over-confident in himself and in his possibilities, had to acknowledge his weakness and sin. He was a sinner like everyone else, as needy as the others, as frail as anyone else. Peter had failed the one he had promised to protect. It is a crucial moment in Peter's life. As disciples, as Church, we can have the same experience: there are moments when we have to face not our success but our weakness. Crucial moments in the life of a disciple, but also the times when an apostle is born."

Excerpts from the address of Pope Francis to Chile's priests, religious, consecrated persons and seminarians gathered in the Cathedral of Santiago - Full Address [Here](#)

LEARNING FROM FAILURE - EXERCISE

While it is disappointing to experience a setback, the way we handle ourselves in these moments shape our growth toward success.

Part 1: Our views on failure

- What words, thoughts and feelings do you usually associate with failure? How are these worldviews affecting your overall approach to failure?
- Looking back, how would you describe the way you tend to deal with unsuccessful endeavors? Is there a pattern that you can identify?

Part 2: Managing Failure

In her TED talk ([Link](#)), Elizabeth Gilbert shares a personal experience of success and failure. She suggests that both had thrown her way out of herself (one into the blinding glare of fame and praise, and the other in the blinding darkness of disappointment). The way she found for self-restoration was to “find her way back home again”, to something that she loved more than her own ego.

- What are two personal experiences of success and failure?
- What was the immediate impact of each experience on yourself? How did each of them challenge you?
- How did you manage the outcome? How did you find your “way back home”?
- Looking back, what learning and graces did these events carry? How can you be more present to these graces in the future, without being shaken by “the random hurricanes of outcome”?

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

There are currently no additional exercises for this section

LEARNING FROM FAILURE - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Failure is not easy and often inevitable in today's complex world. It is also an opportunity to learn, reflect and challenge our thinking and ways of work, and finally to regroup and prepare for what is ahead. While we generally try to avoid failure, and having failed, experience a range of emotional reactions, it is also generally the case that we learn more from our mistakes than our successes. The After Action Review and elements of Action Inquiry (Torbert, 2005) are helpful processes that are effective for reviewing a project or action that failed to reach desired impact.

MAIN IDEAS

Our ways of dealing with failure

We all have our insecurities about doing things incorrectly and are discomforted when things do not go as planned. However, when the outcomes of our work (what we do) become intertwined with our identity (who we are), it may help to reflect on our ways of dealing with failure.

Raising such an awareness is often a source of liberation as it helps us identify unhelpful patterns that might have been keeping us stuck (old patterns and needs for validation that we carry from childhood, perfectionism, over personalization, fragile self-confidence).

- How safe is it to fail?
- When do you feel that the pressure to avoid failure is overshadowing your desire to create and make a difference? How is this fear getting in your way? (stress, concealing errors, blame and finger-pointing, risk aversion...)
- How can you reframe your beliefs about your ultimate goal?

Failure: An opportunity to learn

While failure is deeply uncomfortable, it is an inevitable and very valuable learning experience that is crucial for innovation and creativity. Many organizations have created awards to celebrate failure. These initiatives encourage employees to first acknowledge and take ownership of setbacks they are involved in and most importantly reflect on and learn from them not only for their personal benefit, but for the benefit of the entire system. Examples include: Heroic Failure award (Grey), Lean Forward, Fail Smart award (NASA); Dare to Try award (Tata Group).

- Think of failures that would be good to celebrate? How did they shift your mindset and refine your ways of knowing, doing and being?

While the wisdom of learning from failure is undeniable, the concept of reflecting on our setbacks and learning from them supposes first that we are able to question how we conceive failure (our expectations, beliefs, responses...). When we choose to stop confusing failure with fault and dare to go beyond the discomfort it carries, we are able to take personal ownership for the outcome of our failed attempts and safely pause to reflect on and learn from them.

On the other hand, when we are less likely to internally attribute failure, we anxiously dispense our energy to look for excuses and blame it on external circumstances, which directly delays our learning. Until we start looking at failure in a productive way and learn to fail intelligently, we will fail to learn from failure. (Cannon and Edmondson, 2004)

A simple and helpful process to capture lessons learned from past events with the goal of improving future performance is the After Action Review (AAR). This methodology has been first used in the Army and was gradually adopted in business in the 1990s. (HBR 1993, "Building a Learning Organisation" by David Garvin). For more details Refer to Handout - After Action Review.

IGNATIAN NOTE

What feelings come up when you think of failure? Usually, a sense of shame; a sense of disgrace; a sense of disappointment. Or sometimes we just avoid thinking about it and move on to something else, quickly. And yet St. Ignatius was always strong on daily reflection. Just as Jesus withdrew often from the crowds and his active ministry to reflect and prayer, Ignatius strongly urged Jesuits to do the same twice a day in the form of the Examen. He wanted his Companions to learn from mistakes and move into a space where they could be free about what things had gone wrong. As individuals called for leadership, we too gain insight and perspective when making a habit of reflection, especially upon setbacks and failure. Such a practice can bear many good fruits, not only for enhancing future effectiveness, but also for deeper insight about oneself and others, and into the ways that God can "write straight with crooked lines."

Adolfo Nicolás, the previous General of the Society of Jesus, talks about celebrating failure. He probably meant becoming more free about our failures; learning to be light about them; learning to laugh at ourselves, learning not to shrink away from challenges, learning to follow Jesus more closely who himself endured the scandal and failure of the Cross.

We all know that in our lives there have been things that did not go well. Usually we think that if we admit our failures or show our feet of clay, people won't respect us, when the opposite is actually the case. Trying to seem perfect makes us brittle, bad tempered, shallow. But if we appear as we really are, then those who are working with us can appreciate us as real persons, with strengths and weaknesses, limitations and possibilities. Teams form more easily around those kinds of leaders. We grow in being respected.

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians says "When I am weak, then I am strong". He talks about a battle he had, "a thorn in the flesh" that he could not get rid of. We don't know what it was. Maybe it was some kind of failure on a personal level. And yet, having begged the Lord three times to remove it he concluded that God's grace was sufficient and that in fact this failure was 'to keep me from being too proud'. With God, our failures become opportunities for humbleness which grant us a valuable closeness to others

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Exploring the “learner’s mindset” that embraces failures and mistakes as a path to growth
2. Reflecting on our pattern of dealing with experiences that disappointed
3. Practicing an “After Action Review”

“Obstacles, for Ignatius, were often a sign of the correctness of his undertaking. When something went on too long without an obstacle, he grew a bit uneasy. His conviction was that a great thing awakens contradiction”

Willi Lambert

LEARNING FROM FAILURE - HANDOUT

Purpose:

An After Action Review (AAR) is a simple process to capture the lessons learned from (past successes and) failure, with the intent of improving future interventions, performance and chances for goal completion.

Format:

- AARs can be short, frequent project check ins, or more extended, in-depth explorations.
- In a simple format it consists in:
 - a. a review of the goal (what was intended),
 - b. what actually happened,
 - c. why it happened and what learning arise from the experience.

Useful Considerations:

- AARs are most fruitful when conducted with an openness, curiosity, and an intention of discovery, rather than defensiveness or blame.
- The benefit from personal AARs is maximized when the exercise is held with a coach or mentor.
- It is also helpful to use a learning journal for this purpose, or even a leadership blog that makes this learning public. Such a practice can be most effective for encouraging others to do the same.

When to use:

While this practice is an opportunity to reflect on a past project, activity, event or task to reveal what has been learned, reassess direction, and review both successes and challenges it can also be employed in the course of a project/event to learn while doing.

How to Use: Learning While Doing – Time to Reflect (From Chris Collison's *Learning to Fly*)

1. Conduct the AAR soon after the action, event, or project. Learning can sometimes be applied right away, even on the next day.
2. Bring the right disposition to the reflection. The ideal stance for an AAR to be fruitful is one of openness, curiosity, and commitment to learning.
3. Ask yourself '**what was supposed to happen?**' Start by dividing the event into discrete activities, each of which had (or should have had) an identifiable objective and plan of action. The reflection begins with the first activity: 'What was supposed to happen?'

4. Ask yourself '**what actually happened?**' This involves focusing on and understanding the facts about what happened. Remember, though, that the aim is to identify a problem, rather than blame yourself or accuse others.
5. Now compare the plan with reality. The real learning begins as you compare the plan to what actually happened in reality and determine 'why were there differences?', 'what can I learn?' 'How can I grow from this?', 'What positive can come from this situation?'
6. Consider using the *Action Inquiry* approach (see practices and exercises [section](#)) that explores the gap between your intention, vision, or goal, and what actually happened in three steps.
 - i. The first loop of learning considers whether there was something about your behaviors or tactics that could have been done differently so as to achieve the result or impact you desired.
 - ii. If that is insufficient, the double loop of learning explores whether you might have needed to shift your strategy, the assumptions upon which your strategy was based, or your mind-set.
 - iii. If this second level of learning and adaptation is not sufficient, the third loop of learning and change involves examining the spirit in which the action, project, or event was conducted. Further, the triple loop examines the vision, or intention itself.
7. Identify and reflect on both successes and shortfalls. Put in place action plans to sustain the successes and to improve upon the shortfalls.
8. Record the key points. Recording the key elements of an AAR clarifies what happened and compares it to what was supposed to happen. It can facilitate sharing of learning experiences within your organization or network, and provides the basis for a broader learning program in the organization.

LEARNING FROM FAILURE- RESOURCES

GENERAL RESOURCES

Title	Author	Publisher	Year	Link
Strategies for Learning from Failure	Amy C. Edmondson	HBR		Link
Failing to learn and learning to fail (intelligently): How great organizations put failure to work to improve and innovate	Amy C. Edmondson and Mark D. Cannon		2004	Link
The surprising habits of original thinkers	Adam Grant	TED		Link
How To Conquer The Fear Of Failure - 5 Proven Strategies	Vanessa Loder	Forbes		Link
The unexpected benefit of celebrating failure	Astro Teller	TED		Link
Learning to Fly	Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell			
Success, failure and the drive to keep creating	Elizabeth Gilbert	TED		Link

IGNATIAN RESOURCES

Title	Author	Publisher	Year	Link
The Grace of Failure	Tim Muldoon			Link
Pope addresses Chilean priests, religious, seminarians	Pope Francis	Vatican News	2018	Link

QUOTES

- “Attachment to the fruit of our work is so much a source of unhappiness in many of us.” Adolfo Nicolas
- “Whoever fears human beings will never accomplish anything great for God: nothing worthy of God can be done without setting the world on its ear” - Ignatius of Loyola (Beiträge zu seinem Charakterbild, 238)
- “Original thinkers feel fear, too. They’re afraid of failing, but what sets them apart from the rest of us is that they’re even more afraid of failing to try. They know you can fail by starting a business that goes bankrupt or by failing to start a business at all. They know that in the long run, our biggest regrets are not our actions but our inactions.” Adam Grant
- “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” - Samuel Beckett
- “Failure and fault are virtually inseparable in most households, organizations and cultures. Every child learns at some point that admitting failure means taking the blame. That is why so few organizations have shifted to a culture of psychological safety in which the rewards of learning from failure can be fully realized.” Amy C. Edmondson
- “The greatest originals are the ones who fail the most, because they're the ones who try the most.” Adam Grant
- “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” – Thomas A. Edison
- ‘We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.’ – John Dewey
- “I will always be safe from the random hurricanes of outcome as long as I never forget where I rightfully live.” Elizabeth Gilbert
- “Discovering a major flaw in a project doesn't always mean that it ends the project. Sometimes it actually gets us onto a more productive path.” Astro Teller
- “Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.” Eleanor Roosevelt
- “The greatest teacher, failure is.” Yoda
- “Much of life is about failure, whether we acknowledge it or not, and your destiny is profoundly shaped by how effectively you learn from and adapt to failure.” David Brooks
- “My experience is that we learn much more from failure than we do from success” - Alan George Lafley
- “Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat.” — F. Scott Fitzgerald
- “There is no failure. Only feedback.” — Robert Allen
- “Failure is an event, never a person.” — William D. Brown
- “I failed my way to success.” — Thomas Edison