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The **POWER** of
FAILURE

27 Ways to
Turn Life's Setbacks into
Success



**PRESCRIPTIONS FOR A MORE
PRODUCTIVE, PROSPEROUS, AND PEACEFUL LIFE**

An Excerpt From

***The Power of Failure:
27 Ways to Turn Life's Setbacks into Success***

by Charles C. Manz

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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Introduction

Succeeding with the Power of Failure

Only he who does nothing makes no mistakes.

—*French Proverb*¹

Would you like to be successful throughout the remainder of your life? Would you like to enjoy meaningful success where you learn, grow, and contribute in significant ways; where your life is full, counts for something, and makes a difference? If your answer is “yes,” then you must fail. There is no exception to this rule. *Significant success requires failure*, but failure must be regarded in a whole new light. That is what this book is about—how to use the *Power of Failure* to Succeed.

Failure is one of the most dreaded words in the English language. The very idea of failing is enough to stop most people in their tracks. It can cause the

majority to simply pack up, turn around, and retreat without even trying.

Success, on the other hand, is nearly a magical idea for most people. The possibility of succeeding or becoming a “success” is an almost mythical pursuit. People love to be labeled a success and will often sacrifice greatly to achieve this end.

Although most people hate to be labeled a failure and love to be labeled a success, it is only through seeming failure that most of life’s greatest successes are achieved. Usually, “failure” or “success” is almost entirely in the eye of the beholder.

As an example, who can forget the classic children’s story *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Andersen? One of the birds in a community of ducks is singled out for constant ridicule because he is so different from the rest. He is treated as an utter failure and comes to view himself as exactly that. Consequently, he loses his sense of hope, falls into despair, and runs away from his troubles.

Eventually the Ugly Duckling learns that his difference is not the curse that he thought it was. In fact, when he finally sees his own reflection in a pond and discovers that he is a magnificent swan, his apparent failure in life is completely transformed.

This story may reflect an essential truth about what we call “failure.” It is very often a misperception about the difference between what exists and goes unnoticed (such as growth and learning when

we fall short of reaching a goal) and what is realized later (longer term success).

Of course, sometimes failure is tied to a lack of competence to perform in the face of a specific challenge, but seeming failures can be a powerful way to learn and ironically provide the means for life's greatest breakthroughs and successes. Eventually we can learn to accept that what most people call failures are usually only temporary setbacks in relation to some arbitrary standard and are an essential part of life. They are usually just *challenges in progress*. This important lesson can help us understand that the only real failures occur when we back away from worthwhile challenges without even trying or when we refuse to learn from our setbacks.

Changing our perspective is often the key to finding success in seeming failure. Optimistic thinking has sometimes gotten a bad rap as being unrealistic, but research has found that we can indeed live happier, healthier, and more successful lives if we can learn to discover the opportunities in problems. These problems then become merely challenging opportunities that we can turn to our advantage. They provide opportunities for personal growth and can stimulate our creativity for finding better ways to live.

In the end, the Ugly Duckling makes this kind of discovery and is magnificently transformed. Then he is able to take flight as the beautiful swan that he is

and soar high above the ducks that had treated him with such disdain. We too can more fully live as the magnificent beings that we are if we can come to see that:

- Challenges are disguised opportunities
- Differences are a gift
- Mistakes are learning opportunities
- When we try our best and are willing to learn, we always succeed, even if we don't achieve the results we hoped for.

This book is designed to provide simple yet profound ways to turn seeming failures into successes. It contains practical prescriptions for successfully meeting some of life's most common setbacks. The lessons of this book are organized into four parts. They include redefining success and failure, winning through losing, coping with failure, and collaborating with failure. It will become obvious that these four parts, while distinct, are also highly related and that the lessons contained in each significantly overlap. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider the various prescriptions that this book has to offer across these four key areas for turning failure into success.

It is also helpful to think of the various specific lessons of this book in relation to a larger whole—more general guidelines for failing successfully. Most

of the book's prescriptions relate to some primary themes, which are summarized in the following list. We can think of these themes as a new view or vision of how we can transform failure so that it contributes positively to more successful living.

A New View of Failure: Some Primary Themes

- 1. Redefine Failure.** Failure is a natural part of life that can impact us positively or negatively depending on how we define it.
- 2. Redefine Success.** The more important measure of success is based on our own deeper knowing of what's right for us rather than approval or disapproval from others.
- 3. Learn from Failure.** Failure presents an opportunity for continued learning and growth while success can lead to complacency and stagnation.
- 4. View Failures as Stepping-Stones to Success.** Success and failure are not incompatible—most failures are simply *challenges in progress* that can provide a foundation for success.
- 5. Find the Opportunities of Failure.** Setbacks or short-term failures can contribute to future success if we focus on the opportunities they contain rather than the obstacles.
- 6. Use Negative Feedback to Your Advantage.** Current negative feedback can provide positive

information for improvement or may even suggest that you are onto something new and different—a sign of a pending breakthrough success.

7. **Look Beyond Yourself.** As you learn to focus outward, on helping others succeed rather than yourself, you become less vulnerable to what otherwise might appear to be personal failures.
8. **Persist.** Keep on trying and trying.
Sustained Effort + the Lessons of Failures
is a powerful formula for success.

One other point should be made at the outset. This book is not advocating failure as end in itself. Rather, failure is a means, an essential ingredient, to successful living. The value of failure is in the learning and growth that it provides. Without learning and growth, failure can be a destructive force in our lives. In that sense this book is really about effective success, not success that leads to an inflated self-image and complacency, but rather success as a way of living that benefits from all life has to offer. And that includes successful learning in the face of setbacks and what some mislabel as failure.

The lessons of this book can help us find the opportunities that are just waiting to be discovered in the challenges and “failures” we face every day. They offer *prescriptions for a more productive, prosperous, and*

peaceful life. This book is about failure, but failure seen in a whole new light. It is about how we can harness the *Power of Failure* to help us succeed.

To help get this process started, old and new definitions of failure and success follow. I hope that by the end of this book the new definitions of success and failure will become a natural part of your perspective of life.

Failure

Old Definition

A negative, fatal, and final result indicating:

- An inability to perform and a lack of success
- A falling short because of ineptness, deficiency, or negligence
- A bad, bad thing that should be avoided, mourned, and punished.

New Definition

A short-term unexpected result that reflects a challenge in progress and that provides:

- A stepping-stone to success
- An opportunity for learning and development
- An opportunity for creative change and innovation.

Success

Old Definition

A revered shrine of achievement.

An all-positive final result indicating:

- Superior ability that requires no further learning or change
- Performance that is devoid of flaws, weakness, or failure
- A good, good thing that should be sought, celebrated, and honored above all else.

New Definition

A way of living founded on benefiting from all life has to offer that is:

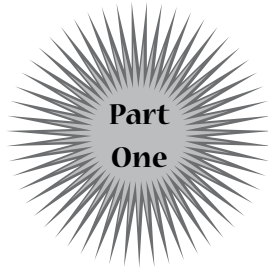
- A long-term sequence of life-improving results
- An outcome of short-term setbacks and failures
- A process of continual development, learning, and fulfillment in life.

*If you can dream —
and not make dreams your master;*

*If you can think —
and not make thought your aim;*

*If you can **meet with**
Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors
just the same . . .*

—From "If" by Rudyard Kipling



Redefining Failure and Success

Failure is not something to be feared. It contains a positive challenge for successful living. Today's failures contain the seeds of tomorrow's greatest successes. The first step to mastering the art of failing successfully is to come to see failure and success in a whole new light.



To Succeed More, Fail More

Failure is the foundation of success,
and the means by which it is achieved.

—Lao Tzu²

An aspiring young man once asked a very prominent CEO how he could become more successful. The CEO was Tom Watson of IBM, who reportedly responded that if the young man wanted to become more successful he should do the seemingly unthinkable—fail. In fact, Watson advised that he should *double his failure rate*. At first glance this is an odd prescription indeed. Upon closer inspection, however, it contains a great deal of wisdom.

A failure should not be viewed as the end of the story but instead as a stepping-stone to a larger success. If someone never fails, this is a telltale sign that he is not trying anything new or challenging. Mastering new skills and growing as individuals

require that we enter unfamiliar arenas that can provide us with new knowledge and capabilities. These new ventures can be as varied as learning to play the piano, speak a foreign language, water-ski, or invest in the stock market.

The principle remains the same—you must experience failure in order to succeed. If you expect to learn without making a mistake, you are in for an unpleasant surprise. Imagine Mozart or Beethoven trying to compose music so cautiously that they never hit a wrong note. Do you think they would have been able to compose masterpieces if they totally avoided mistakes?

In fact, Beethoven was no stranger to failure. At one stage in his music career a music teacher said that he had no talent for music. The teacher even remarked that “as a composer he is hopeless.”

The more you try to grow your knowledge and experience in new and challenging areas, the more mistakes you will have to make. Much of this potential for growth boils down to being willing to take risks. Author Carole Hyatt wrote that aggressive CEOs will tell their direct reports: “If you haven’t failed at least three times today you haven’t tried anything new.” And she adds that avoiding failure leads to avoiding risks—“a type of behavior not well suited to most businesses in today’s economy.”³ So if you want to succeed more quickly, heed the surprisingly sage advice—*double your failure rate.*



**If you want to be more successful ...
"double your failure rate."**



Be a Successful Learner by Learning from Failure

Bill Gates provided a practical perspective on the importance of learning from failure in his book *Bill Gates @ the Speed of Thought*, “Once you embrace unpleasant news not as negative but as evidence of a need for change, you aren’t defeated by it. You’re *learning* from it.”^{4,5} He then went on to list many costly Microsoft product failures that provided the learning and opportunity for development of many of Microsoft’s biggest successes, mentioning the following examples:

- Many apparently wasted years working on a failed database called Omega resulted in the development of the most popular desktop database, Microsoft Access.

- Millions of dollars and countless hours invested in a joint operating system project with IBM that was discontinued led to the operating system Windows NT.
- A failed multiplan spreadsheet that made little headway against Lotus 1-2-3 provided learning that helped in the development of Microsoft Excel, an advanced graphic spreadsheet that leads the competition.

Clearly Bill Gates had a view of successful learning from setbacks that helped him and his company to turn many potential failures into dynamic successes.

Without a doubt one of the most powerful pillars of long-term success is learning from mistakes. The importance of learning from mistakes for achieving significant success is so widely recognized that it might almost seem unnecessary to mention. A challenging, well-lived, and successful life will be filled with both ups and downs. Growing as a person and addressing significant real-world problems means we will surely fail some of the time, but if we learn from these failures and stay the course, we will eventually succeed.

Effective learning of challenging activities largely depends on how we think about failure. Just as we develop habits in our behavior, we also develop habits in our thoughts. And many of us have power-

ful thought habits about failure that include negativity and self-criticism and these demoralize us. The result is that we impede the very learning that we need to help things work out better the next time around. The challenge is to manage our thoughts about failures in such a way that we learn from them and consequently increase our personal effectiveness in our work and life.

If we can concentrate on learning from every situation, especially those in which we seem to fail, we will continually move ahead. This effective approach might be called learning forward. How can we learn forward through failures? To begin with, view short-term failures as the building blocks for future success and concentrate on learning all you can from them rather than trying to make excuses or trying to cover up these temporary setbacks. The trick is to always move forward as you fail.

For example, golfers would choose progressively more difficult courses and try more challenging shots as they progress in their game. At first, a relatively easy course and making conservative shot selections may represent the right amount of challenge. Over time, more difficult courses and more aggressive shots (trying to shoot over the trees rather than playing it safe and going around them) can be chosen. Undoubtedly the greater challenge will bring with it more mistakes and setbacks, but learning will increase as well.

As you master this process you can purposely choose new and greater challenges to learn from throughout your life that stretch you more and more. Fail at greater and greater worthwhile challenges, and you can learn on your way to ultimate long-term success.



**Setbacks are simply evidence of a
need for change and a chance to learn.**

this material has been excerpted from

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