

The beauty of failure

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COOL TIPS

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The fear of failure could be paralyzing, yet without experimenting and risking failure, innovation doesn't thrive. Playing "it" safe would have never yielded the Model T Ford, the pacemaker or the personal computer.

I had the pleasure of participating on the Associated Black Charities' "Women on Move" panel, discussing what attributes drive "success." Inspiring words from brilliantly successful ladies, yet I worried about incomplete storytelling. I intentionally asked about failure. To an audience full of women (with a handful of daring men, too!), the words of success and accomplishment could be misconstrued. The accomplishments did not come easily and without stumbles, trips and even epic failures.

First, there's no perfect journey. Airbrushing and Photoshop don't exist in day-to-day life. We often remember the end result (case in point: birthing a SECOND and THIRD child.) Don't get distracted with the obstacles and challenges along the way. Remember the goal, whether launching the company, getting your doctorate or seeking the promotion. Of course, payroll will be tight, the thesis research never ends and the interview didn't go well. Stumbles. Actually these are lessons learned.

"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." — NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan.

My goal is to inspire you to take reasonable risks and stretch yourself past the point of comfort. Remember, staying within the safe zone yields nothing stellar, just the same ol' same ol. Here are some tips you can take to facilitate the journey and increase the probability of great success.

Regardless of your goal, craft a plan, write it down and be prepared to retool it when the obstacles hit. Understanding the "why" behind your journey places everything into perspective and allows for clarity of thought. Launching my firm focusing on "Hispanic Strategy" was innovative, except no one who approved the budget understood the concept. The CFO, the marketing manager or HR? A longer sales cycle than expected was not ideal for the ego or the bank account, but I reworked the concept, broke it into bite sizes — marketing, training and recruiting, which was more palatable for the client. Each area could easily align within their internal processes.

Failure can stem from unclear expectations, difficult relationships or just drama queens. I intentionally seek out folks who lift and empower me and others with their actions and words. Paying it forward, celebrating one another, forming strategic alliances, referring business, recommending a colleague: We are so busy succeeding collectively that we avoid failure.

Consider the emotional impact of not knowing your value. Working for less than you are worth causes resentment and dissatisfaction, affecting your performance, passion and drive. You fail. Avoid this by knowing how your education, expertise, experience add up to your value and negotiating effectively in contacts, salary or bids.

As I put my children on the school bus, I yell, "Don't suck today!" It gets a chuckle from the boy and an eye roll from the teenage girl, but I expect them to exert themselves.

Mediocrity is not success. Without a modicum of discomfort you risk nothing and thereby no failure evolves. But, then again, they wouldn't be developing analytical thinking, questioning the why, a skill of scientists, problem solvers and leaders.

And finally, to paraphrase my friend Pat Lambert, senior partner at Pessin Katz Law, ASK. She states that women struggle with the "ask" — asking for the raise, asking for the business, the case, the project, the date (ask her about the ruse of hosting an entire party, just to get her now-husband to attend versus just asking him on a date!) Without asking, you haven't even entered the game ... You have failed yourself. Develop your elevator pitch focusing on the value you bring to an organization and clients. Be strategic about seeking opportunities for yourself and ask for the business.

JUST ASK.

While you are in the process of "asking," seek a seat at the table, if not for you, than for another influential woman. Currently women hold less than 5 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs positions and approximately 20 percent of U.S. congressional seats. Without increasing our representation, the issues shaping our lives — health, education, access, equality — are neglected and ignored. Failure.

The opportunity to expand and achieve success stems from seeking reasonable risk. Yes, there will be failure. But, you see, it's not failure, but rather, lessons learned.

"It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all — in which case, you fail by default." — J.K. Rowling

**This article was originally posted on The Daily Record.*

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