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# ROOM TO FAIL

## WHY FAILURE IS SO IMPORTANT FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

By ERNEST ANTOINE  
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**T**HE prospect of failure strikes fear in the hearts of most of us. We usually do anything we can to avoid the prospect of failing. If failure seems to be inevitable, we often try to hide our role in it or downplay its importance.

Why? Fear of failure is a deeply engrained psychological drive.

Originally, fear kept us safe from sabre-toothed tigers or enemies from across the seas.

In the modern world, the equivalent of the sabre tooth tiger is anybody who holds power over us and can threaten us.

Even though they may not literally eat us, contemporary tigers have the power to inflict deep psychological wounds.

In organisations, we may instinctively fear bosses who can hire and fire us and make our lives difficult.

Less powerful, but equally fearsome, is the prospect of public humiliation. At work, we may go to great lengths to avoid serious mistakes in case our bosses and colleagues find out.

If they do, there is usually a stern word from the boss and colleagues may whisper behind our backs.

This is equivalent to being rejected by the group. Group membership gives us comfort, safety and reassurance.

At a deeper level, it also gives us a sense of belonging, purpose and identity. Failure can put all of these at risk.

Remember Steve Jobs? Even he was rejected by Apple, the organisation that he co-founded. Nobody is spared!

### THE CULTURE OF LOSING FACE

Malaysians are very good at avoiding making mistakes for fear of losing face.

It is so important for us to be approved by our bosses, peers and team members, we avoid taking risks that may result in failure.

An emerging leader in a large multinational company in Kuala Lumpur said: "I am not prepared to share my failure with this team."

He considered that such an action would result in loss of face and loss of respect from his subordinates.

He added: "If my boss finds out, that could be bad for me."

Another leader in the financial services industry said: "I would lose the respect of my subordinates if I were to share my failure with them. I can't afford that, as they look up to me to show them the right way."

The concept of loss of face is founded in deeply held cultural values in Malaysia.

This is based on the value of respect for authority which, in practice, means we don't do anything that might upset our bosses.

We value our relationships with our colleagues and want to be part of a group, so we don't disrupt these relationships through an embarrassing or silly mistake.

We prefer stability and seek to avoid failures that will put this at risk.

In this context, leaders who wish to embrace failure as a learning opportunity will do well to understand the psychology of fear.

If they can understand how cultural values prevent people from acting in innovative ways that could possibly fail, this may also help their support for teams and organisations that really need to change to succeed in the modern world.

### LEADERS LEAD THE WAY

Asking leaders to embrace failure as a learning opportunity is easy to ask, but hard for them to do.

In a rapidly changing, highly competitive and deeply unpredictable world, leaders have to take every opportunity to stay ahead of the game.

Learning from failure is one such opportunity and one which is increasingly used across the globe.

Kodak, Nokia, Enron, Lehman Brothers and many others no longer exist, in part because their leaders may not have paid enough attention to managing and learning from failure.

Broadly speaking, failure is the gap between objectives and outcomes. This can occur for individuals within an organisation such as a salesperson.

Or failures can occur within teams, departments, functions or the whole corporation. No matter where they occur, they are all learning opportunities.

Companies that have learnt from their failures are usually still here to tell the story. One such company is Domino's Pizza.

**If an organisation wants to remain relevant, failure must be embraced as a learning opportunity.**

Declining sales prior to 2010 prompted CEO Patrick Doyle to go on national television in the US to declare that they their products were not meeting customers' expectations.

They even ran ads that quoted dissatisfied customers, such as "Domino's pizza crust is like cardboard!"

But they didn't stop there. They worked on improving their recipe, involving customers along the way. Customers returned, sales improved and so did profitability.

If an organisation wants to remain relevant, failure must be embraced as a learning opportunity.

For this to happen, starting from the top is essential, as leaders have to show how it is done for others to follow, particularly in a hierarchical culture.

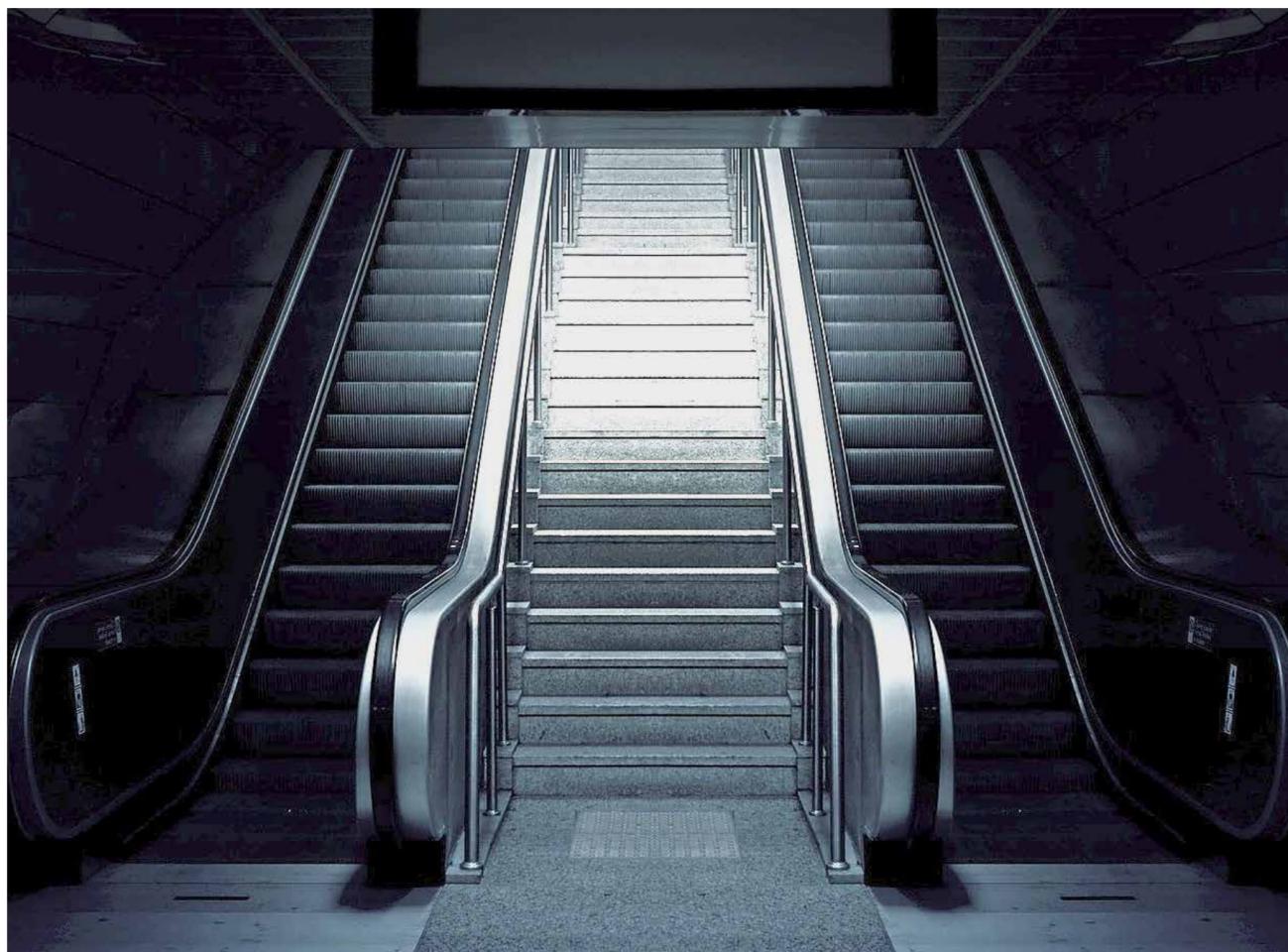
Leaders have to unlearn their beliefs, values and behaviours about failure.

They then have to build a reservoir of inner strength, to help them to confront failure not as something that is going to destroy them but something that is going to make them stronger.

Leaders need to take deliberate steps to learn from what happens, not in terms of how to avoid failure categorically, but how to learn about what factors contribute to potential success in a dynamic and complex world.

In this rapidly changing world, we often can't know in advance whether something will succeed or not, so we need to experiment, adapt and innovate in order to find out.

The process of experimenting, reflecting and revising our practices will help us to develop new and potentially more effective beliefs, values and behaviour, based on actual experience and confidence, rather than fear of failure.



### BE MINDFUL

Mindfulness is one of a range of useful techniques for leaders to use in order to learn from failure.

There are three easy steps – firstly, step out of the failure experience and observe your own thoughts, feelings, sensations and impulses about what has happened;

secondly, don't judge them but just observe with openness and kindness to yourself and others; and finally, be curious and show a lively interest in the failure and your own reactions to it.

Mindfulness will help you develop a learning mindset in relation to failure.

### CULTURE OF LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Once leaders have developed a willingness to learn from failure, they are ready to take their team with them on this journey.

Culture is the beating heart of an organisation. For anything to succeed, the heart must be in the right place.

This applies especially to an organisation's willingness to learn from failure.

It may appear counter-intuitive to think about failure as an opportunity to learn, and this is why organisations have pushed the idea under the carpet for so long.

A learning-oriented culture at the organisational level will help individuals and teams to learn from failure as much as anything else in the workplace.

Leaders can take a number of steps to build such a culture. Even though our formal schooling may have been based on a simple 'success or failure' kind of thinking, our modern workplaces cannot continue this approach.

Harnessing the diversity of different ideas and disciplines available to us today, combined with the confidence to continuously try new things, learning from experience and expanding on the successful

experiments, are what will help organisations to prosper.

### 1. It is important for leaders to explicitly state that failures are learning opportunities

Indeed, they can communicate the message that we can often learn more from our failures than from our successes.

Learning is the key for reaching for something beyond ourselves. Even if we fail, the experience can make us stronger for the next challenge.

We can grow as people and teams if we can reach the outer limits of our capabilities. The converse is working within our comfort zone and not reaching for the stars.

Re-framing failure as a positive learning experience will encourage people to openly speak about what is possible rather than what is easy.

### 2. Leaders should formalise systems and behaviour that encourage open discussion about failure

The way to do this is to schedule times for reflection by teams and individuals as part of regular meetings.

At the start of these sessions, mindfulness steps, mentioned above, can be practiced. In this context, team members should be encouraged to share their insights as others listen carefully, **without judgment**, but with an openness to learn.

Professor Francesca Gino, from Harvard Business School, has found that reflection is now commonplace in many successful organisations.

She notes that when sessions are led by a facilitator rather than a leader, everyone is then free to share their thoughts and

feelings about what has been learnt, but some people within teams can be natural facilitators, so if regular sessions are held, internal facilitators are often suitable.

More experience in facilitating contributes to greater expertise in this area too.

### 3. Effective leaders encourage people to reach for new challenges

Team members should be encouraged to identify their strengths and opportunities for new development in readiness for the next challenge.

Leaders may also invite team members with complementary skills to work together on the next assignment.

Leaders and more experienced team members acting as mentors and coaches for less experienced team members will also encourage them to reach for new challenges.

### FINALLY

In conclusion, leaders have a key role to play in reframing failure as a learning opportunity.

They should lead by example and then build a resilient organisational culture that is open to learning from unsuccessful outcomes.

These are significant challenges as they go against the grain for most Malaysian leaders.

You may be able to think of a few enlightened leaders over history who have proclaimed their failures and explained how they have learnt from them, but they are rare indeed.

In the public eye, it is almost unheard of for Malaysian leaders to say their actions have not delivered the intended result and they will therefore try another way.

For a Malaysia that succeeds in a challenging and dynamic modern world, our leaders need to show courage, strength and integrity through portraying failure as a critical learning opportunity.

## 6 REASONS EVEN THE BEST PROJECT MANAGERS FAIL

By KARIN HURT  
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THE project is mission critical, and complicated with lots of moving parts across departments. You've assigned your rock star, project manager (PM) to shepherd the process and the project is way behind schedule.

She's frustrated, you're one missed deadline away from frantic, and your boss wants to know what she can do to help. What next?

### 6 REASONS EVEN THE BEST-RUN PROJECTS DERAIL

When great PMs fail, which they sadly sometimes do, the root cause is almost never a breakdown in a technical expertise.

More pressure on the PM won't solve these issues; neither will more frequent readouts or points of escalation.

When your great PMs fail, take a step back and check for these surefire project derailers.

### 1 LACK OF EXECUTIVE ALIGNMENT

Of course, every executive in the room was "all in" when their boss said: "Fix this now, we need all hands on deck."

But what exactly does that mean? What exactly are we fixing now and how? What does success look like?

Which departments are going to do what by when and how will we know? If this is not clear at the executive level, you'll never foster true collaboration a level or three below.

How does this issue rank in priority to the other top three issues everyone is already working on night and day?

When your PM goes out looking for support and resources, where does this rank? Are you sure all are aligned?

### 2 IT'S NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Closely correlated to No 1, your project team members are attending your meetings, agreeing to next steps, and then going back to their "real" priorities and day jobs.

If your project is not what's top of mind for their boss, it's unlikely any tasks will be on the top of their to-do list.

### 3 THE TEAM'S FULL OF B-PLAYERS

I'm guilty as charged. Perhaps you are too. Have you ever been asked to commit resources to a project that you feel is a distraction from your Most Important Thing?

All "headcount" is not the same. If your project is failing, you may have more than one leader giving you less than their A-team.

### 4 THEY'RE TOO STRESSED TO PUT PEOPLE BEFORE PROJECTS

The pressure's on and the team jumped right in, no wasted time. Teams take a minute to gain trust and to build collaboration.

If the team is failing, a quick time out to focus on the people issues might be just the trick. Go slow to go fast.

### 5 NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR THE TOUGH STUFF

If No 3 doesn't apply, you have the A-team, everyone's aligned on Most Important Things and expectations, but you're telling the team to stop complaining and make it happen – you might be missing the most valuable insights for true project success.

Be sure you and your team are taking time to channel challengers.

### 6 PMs DON'T FEEL EMPOWERED TO HAVE THE TOUGH CONVERSATIONS

No project succeeds without clear expectations and accountability.

But so many of the PMs we work with share how hard this is without the support they need to lead through influence.

Your turn. When great PMs struggle, or when important projects derail, where do you look first?

**Karin Hurt is a keynote speaker, leadership consultant, and MBA professor. She has decades of experience in sales, customer service, and HR which she uses to help clients turn around results through deeper engagement. If you want more opportunities to Win Well, email us at editor@leaderonomics.com.**



Ernie is a psychologist specialising in global leadership. He engages leaders to understand themselves more deeply and to make a positive contribution to the world. He believes the hierarchical style of leadership found in Malaysia and many parts of the world is no longer fit for purpose. He helps leaders to become relational, connected, authentic and inclusive. To contact Ernie, e-mail editor@leaderonomics.com