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Friend or Foe?

Both failure and success can teach valuable lessons

By Steve Gladis, PhD



Ever teach someone how to ride a bike? You need to grab the bike by the seat, keep the bike and rider balanced, run alongside, encourage the rider, and above all, be patient. Riding a bike is an iterative process of starts, stops, successes, failures, and inevitable bumps and scrapes along the way. But it's ultimately well worth the pain because it opens up so much of the world to a child.

In fact, learning how to ride a bike is a lot like building any business, such as coaching!

All worthwhile skills require attention and discipline; you get what you focus on. Moreover, every business – and coaching is a business – continuously adapts itself to meet the ever-changing environment. And if adaptation were a coin tossed in the air, it has two sides: success and failure. Both sides of this coin are equally important to coaches looking to develop their business. There is much written about success, but considerably less written about failure. The central purpose of this article is to present an argument

to persuade any coach that failure is as vital as success to a thriving coaching business.

Over the years, I've developed two favorite quotes regarding success and failure:

1. *Failure is the crappy first draft of success.*
2. *Success is not always your friend, and failure is not always your enemy.*

All worthwhile skills require attention and discipline; you get what you focus on.

Failure is the Crappy First Draft of Success

Writers understand the notion of failure because it's baked into the writing process that we call "revision." No serious writer writes a "one-and-done" final manuscript; most writers go through multiple drafts before ever daring to send it to an editor. However, newly minted coaches often expect business success immediately after getting their coaching credential but are frustrated when they fail to attract clients easily. However, the stats in both baseball and in the world of startups would argue for much worse percentages – more like only a 20 percent success rate for both at best!

What Can Coaches Do?

- **Recalibrate your early expectations** and learn from every experience by asking what you could have done better to explain your services. Ask clients who don't choose your services, "What about my offerings would have served you better?" You'd be surprised at the guidance that provides you for the next offering.
- **Increase your odds** by offering group presentations. If you know that you have a lower statistical percentage of success than you think, increase the numbers of people you present to in order to increase the yield of potential clients. This is often called the "sales funnel."

Success is not Always your Friend, and Failure is not Always your Enemy

Brené Brown is a professor at the University of Houston, best known for her work on vulnerability and courage. Brown's book, *Daring Greatly*, derives its name from Teddy Roosevelt's speech, "The Man in the Arena," which speaks to the critic and the man fighting in the arena and how,

"daring greatly," he beats back his negative inner critic. By daring greatly, we dare to try, fail and try again; we beat back the inner critic – shame and our own personal gremlins of self-criticism.

In an interview after publishing her book and becoming a celebrity after her wildly successful TED Talk, Brown said that if you have a best seller, "You're screwed!" What she meant is that you get sucked into the pleasure of success and are hesitant to stretch yourself out of a fear of failure. Fear of failure makes us all play it safe, hunker down, play more defense and less offense, and become overly protective of our turf. A question I enjoy asking very successful clients is, "What was your biggest failure in life, and what did you learn from it?" The stories people tell about bankruptcy, divorce, business failure and whatever else you can imagine are as fascinating as they are both painful and inspiring (depending on your mindset).

Carol Dwek, a Stanford psychologist, has been studying the notion of mindset for years. She's found that when people are taught to believe they are smart or intelligent, they tend to adopt a "fixed" mindset and don't take as many chances, fearing failure. "Growth mindset" people are willing to try, fail and learn. They do much better at adapting to changes in life.

Fixed Mindset People continuously try to prove themselves and support their self-image of success. This leads to trying to look smart, constantly building an image, and even putting down others to preserve their own standing. All encounters become matters of success or failure, looking smart or stupid, being accepted or rejected, or feeling like a winner

Fear of failure makes us all play it safe, hunker down, play more defense and less offense, and become overly protective of our turf.

or a loser. Such a fixed mindset makes people avoid risk, stop learning and experimenting, and become defensive, eventually leading them to fall behind and become less relevant – the very thing they are trying to avoid.

Growth Mindset People don't believe they're stuck with the hand they were dealt. Rather, they believe that you get better with practice, and that you can cultivate strengths

through practice and perseverance. This attitude creates a real thirst for knowledge, not just being recognized as merely smart or intelligent. Growth mindsets reject looking smart in favor of truly learning and getting better. They stretch themselves, confront challenges, and take risks rather than play it safe, thus opening up new and exciting doors to walk through.

What Can Coaches Do?

- **Dare Greatly:** Take a chance. It might be taking on group coaching or approaching a potential client you think might blow you off. Maybe you can try to demonstrate coaching in front of a group. I started to do coaching demos in front of groups and thought they were good. However, feedback noted that it got boring. So, I tested out self role play, where I play both coach and client—and then ask the group to chime in. Much better!
- **Treat failure as a friend** teaching you a great lesson. One of my big failures was not being able to explain to one client the difference between coaching and consulting. I took the assignment but never could get her to understand, so ended up giving all her money back. From that point on, I no

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longer take coaching clients unless they fully understand the concept of coaching, and it’s saved me from many problems. I doubt most of us will ever kick the fear of failure. Nobody likes to stumble and fall. And while people love the roar of the crowd when they win, there’s an ironic twist that comes with that success pill: stagnation and playing it safe, both of which can lead to long-term disasters. Indeed, success can lull us into slow-motion mediocrity.

- Finally consider these three questions:
1. *What are you hanging on to because it feels safe?*
 2. *If you could, what would you do?*
 3. *What’s worth failing for?* •

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