

Fail Forward: Leading When Things Go Wrong

Introduction

Let me begin with a simple but uncomfortable truth: **if you lead long enough, you will fail.**

You will make a decision that does not work. You will launch something too early or too late. You will misread a situation. You will trust the wrong assumption. You will speak when you should have listened, or delay when you should have acted.

And if you care deeply about your work, those moments will not feel small. They may shake your confidence, challenge your identity, and even make you question your calling.

Yet some of the most important leadership lessons do not come from the moments when everything works. They come from the moments when things go wrong.

Aldous Huxley wrote, “*Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him*” (Huxley, 1932). That insight matters deeply for leadership. The event itself does not automatically teach us. Time does not automatically teach us. Failure does not automatically teach us. Reflection teaches us. Interpretation teaches us. Response teaches us.

So today, I invite you to look at failure differently: not as something to hide or glorify, but as something that, if handled well, can become one of leadership’s greatest teachers. And I want to add another dimension to that conversation: **forgiveness**. When things go wrong, leaders do not only need courage, reflection, and learning. Sometimes they also need grace.

1. The Myth of Perfect Leadership

In many systems, especially in education, we silently promote a dangerous myth: **good leaders do not make mistakes.**

Teachers feel it. Principals feel it. Administrators feel it. Anyone responsible for people, systems, or outcomes feels that pressure.

We create cultures where mistakes are hidden, weaknesses are masked, and vulnerability is quietly discouraged. We may never say it directly, but the message is clear: competent leaders stay in control, look strong, and avoid visible failure.

But that myth comes at a cost.

Amy Edmondson (1999) introduced the concept of **psychological safety**—the idea that teams perform better when people feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and admit mistakes. In other words, healthy learning cultures are not built on image management. They are built on truthfulness.

And yet, many institutions still reward performance over honesty.

A school leader once said, “I spent more energy protecting my image as a competent leader than actually becoming one.” That is the quiet tragedy of perfectionism in leadership. When leaders spend more energy trying not to fail than to grow, their development slows. Their teams become cautious. Their organizations lose the courage to learn.

Failure is not always a sign of weak leadership. Sometimes the inability to acknowledge failure is the deeper weakness.

2. Why Failure Matters

Why is failure so important?

Because failure tells the truth.

It shows us where our systems are weak, where our timing was off, where our communication was unclear, and where our leadership may have lacked patience, humility, or listening.

Success can be comforting, but it is not always clarifying. Success can reinforce what we already believe. Failure forces us to examine what we may have misunderstood.

Success may keep us moving. Failure makes us stop.

And sometimes stopping is exactly what growth requires.

Brené Brown stated in an interview with *The CEO Magazine*: **“There is no innovation and creativity without failure. Period.”** (Devine, 2019). That is true not only for individuals, but also for schools and institutions. The difference between stagnant organizations and learning organizations is often not the absence of failure, but the quality of their response to it.

And this response changes everything.

3. Failure in Real Leadership: Practical Examples

Failure in leadership shows up in ordinary, human moments.

A conversation goes wrong. A change initiative loses momentum. A team meeting does not go as you hoped. A workshop is well prepared, but the room is disengaged. A leader pushes too quickly, assumes too much, or misses the emotional undercurrent of the situation.

Take the example of a difficult conversation. You enter with good intentions. You want clarity, progress, and resolution. But something in your tone, timing, or wording misfires. The conversation becomes tense. The other person shuts down or reacts defensively. What was meant to solve a problem creates a deeper one.

That moment is not only a communication problem. It is a leadership moment.

Or think of change leadership. A leader sees clearly that restructuring is needed. The diagnosis is correct. The processes are outdated. The vision makes sense. The concept is strong on paper. But people resist. And the leader overruns the situation and executes the change. The vision may not have been wrong. The failure is that the leader moved faster than trust could carry.

There is also a quieter kind of failure: a leader may appear productive and committed, while inwardly running empty. Outwardly, things still work; inwardly, identity, purpose, and spiritual depth begin to erode. The person is still performing, but no longer flourishing.

Leadership failure is not always dramatic. Sometimes it is subtle. Sometimes it is relational. Sometimes it is internal. But all of it can teach us—if we are willing to listen.

4. Why Failure Teaches: Insights from Kolb and Edmondson

Learning theory helps us understand why failure can become so formative.

David Kolb's experiential learning theory argues that learning happens through a cycle: **concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation** (Kolb, 1984). In simple terms, we have an experience, reflect on it, draw meaning from it, and then try again with a new understanding.

That means learning is not formed solely by information. It is formed when experience is processed.

And some of the most powerful experiences are failures.

Kolb (1984) wrote, "**Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience**" (p. 38). Notice the word *transformation*. Failure does not automatically produce wisdom. But when failure is reflected on, interpreted honestly, and turned into change, it becomes one of the deepest pathways to growth.

Amy Edmondson adds another important insight. In her work on organizational learning, she distinguishes between different kinds of failure and shows that not all failure is the same (Edmondson, 2011). Some failures are preventable. Some arise from complexity. Some are intelligent failures that occur when we experiment in uncertain conditions. In all of them, the essential question is not only, "Who is responsible?" but "What can this teach us?"

That is a major shift.

Because the moment failure becomes shame, learning usually stops. But the moment failure becomes information, learning begins.

This is why failure is one of leadership's greatest teachers. It interrupts our routines. It reveals our patterns. It surfaces our blind spots. It forces us into reflection. And that reflection becomes the doorway to wiser action.

5. Leading Others Through Failure

At some point, leadership moves beyond self-reflection. The question is no longer only, "How do I respond to failure?" It becomes, "**How do I lead others through failure?**"

This is where leadership becomes cultural.

Can you create an environment where others are allowed to fail—and grow?

Three practices matter here.

First, **normalize learning conversations**. Instead of asking, "Who is responsible?" ask, "What can we learn?" That simple shift changes the emotional climate from blame to reflection.

Second, **model vulnerability**. Leaders set the tone. If you never admit mistakes, your team will not either. A principal who says, "I made a decision last month that did not serve us well. Here is what I learned," does more for culture than any policy document.

Third, **protect psychological safety**. People need to know they will not be humiliated for honest mistakes. This is not about lowering standards. It is about raising learning capacity.

Edmondson (1999) shows that teams learn faster when the truth can surface sooner. When leaders create space for questions, admission of error, and honest reflection, teams become more adaptive, more courageous, and more resilient.

This matters especially in education. Teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge. They are also modelers of learning. Students learn through error. Teachers refine practice through trial and reflection. Institutions improve through honest feedback and thoughtful adaptation.

If educational leaders cannot tolerate failure, they eventually create environments where students play it safe rather than grow. And safe environments are not always healthy environments. Sometimes they are merely fearful ones.

6. When Learning Is Not Enough: The Need for Forgiveness

And yet, learning alone is not always enough.

Some failures are not merely technical. They are relational, moral, and spiritual. Sometimes the problem is not simply that something did not work. Sometimes we know we hurt someone. We failed the people who trusted us. We misjudged a situation, leaving damage in its wake.

That kind of failure cannot always be solved by a better strategy alone.

Sometimes failure leaves guilt. Sometimes it leaves disappointment. Sometimes it leaves relational pain that cannot be managed only through reflection.

This is where forgiveness becomes essential.

Forgiveness does not erase consequences. It does not deny responsibility. It is not pretending that failure does not matter. Forgiveness means that failure does not get the final word.

From a spiritual perspective, forgiveness allows truth and grace to meet. It frees leaders to admit wrong, take responsibility, and repent without despair. That is one of the deepest gifts of grace for leaders: not perfection, but the freedom to tell the truth.

7. Forgiving Ourselves: Releasing Shame and Receiving Grace

Many leaders are willing to admit mistakes on paper, but internally, they still carry them for a very long time.

They replay the conversation. They revisit the decision. They wonder what they should have seen, said, or done. And slowly, failure turns into shame.

But shame is a poor teacher.

It makes leaders defensive, fearful, rigid, and self-protective. Grace, by contrast, makes leaders honest, humble, and teachable.

Forgiving ourselves does not mean excusing ourselves. It means allowing God's grace to interrupt shame. It means learning to say, "I was wrong. I need to change. I regret this. But I am not beyond restoration."

That kind of grace does not make leadership easier in a superficial sense. But it does make it freer. And freer leaders are often more truthful leaders.

There is something deeply grounding in recognizing that our worth is not defined by uninterrupted success. This frees us to learn faster, lead more authentically, and serve more humbly.

8. Forgiving Others: Leading with Truth, Grace, and Accountability

Leadership also means being failed by others.

A colleague does not follow through. A team member misjudges something important. A partner handles responsibility poorly. Someone speaks carelessly and creates tension. A person you trusted disappoints you.

And now the leadership challenge changes.

The question is not only, “How do I learn from my own failure?” It becomes, “How do I lead when others fail?”

Without forgiveness, leaders often drift into one of two extremes: resentment or avoidance. Resentment hardens leadership. Avoidance weakens leadership.

Forgiveness makes something better possible: **truthful accountability without bitterness.**

A leader shaped by forgiveness can say, “This mattered. This was not okay. We need to address it. And I will not let this harden my heart.”

Forgiveness also shapes culture. If a team, school, or department has no culture of forgiveness, people will hide mistakes. They will protect themselves. They will become guarded and political. Learning becomes shallow because the truth is too risky.

But where forgiveness is present, people can be truthful. Not careless. Not irresponsible. But truthful.

This is especially important in education. Teachers need room to grow. Students need opportunities to try again. Leaders need enough maturity to correct without humiliating and to restore without trivializing.

That is not a weakness. It is wise care for people.

9. The Courage to Fail Forward

So what does it mean to fail forward?

It means we do not waste failure.

A simple leadership practice is to ask four questions whenever something goes wrong:

What happened?

Describe the event honestly.

Why did it happen?

What assumptions did I hold? What did I miss? What patterns do I see now?

What is the lesson?

What principle emerges from this experience? What has this revealed?

What will I do differently?

What concrete change in behavior, communication, structure, or leadership follows from this?

Fail-forward leaders do three things well: they face reality honestly, learn from it deliberately, and change course visibly.

The point is not to celebrate mistakes. The point is to extract wisdom from them. This is courage. Not the courage to appear flawless, but the courage to be truthful, teachable, and responsive.

Closing

Leadership is not about being flawless, but about being honest, humble, resilient, and willing to grow.

Failure does not have to disqualify a leader; it can deepen judgment, strengthen character, and open the way for learning, forgiveness, and renewal.

As Kolb reminds us, growth happens when experience is not merely endured but reflected on, understood, and translated into new action. And from a spiritual perspective, forgiveness matters too: it allows leaders to face the truth, take responsibility, and begin again without despair.

Mature leadership is seen not in never falling short, but in learning, repenting, extending grace, and moving forward with greater wisdom.

As the African proverb reminds us, **“Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.”**

Failing is inevitable. Learning is optional. Failing forward is leadership.

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