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STRATEGY

How leaders can reframe failure in a post-pandemic world

The key to building a culture in which failure is seen as a learning experience and strategic risk-taking is both encouraged and rewarded is to remain consistent in your approach.

Sunita Malhotra

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Being labeled a “failure” is typically something that no business leader wants tarnishing their name and reputation, something to be avoided at all costs.

However, the newly published “CEMS Guide to Leadership in a Post-COVID-19 World” – which makes recommendations for leaders, educators and professionals post-pandemic – reveals that COVID-19 has yielded a unique opportunity to stop, reflect and learn; to rethink the culture, operations, processes, frameworks and leadership that define us. Sherif Kamel, dean of the School of Business at The American University in Cairo, [explains in his contribution to the report](#): “The world needs a different leadership style that is more visionary, effective, pragmatic, engaging, empowering, compassionate and transparent.”

Rethinking and reframing failure as part of this transformation is essential. After all, it is impossible to be an empowering, compassionate or transparent 21st century leader when you consider failure a form of dishonor.

As a chief learning officer, you can play a key role in shifting organizational views of failure in order to construct this successful post-pandemic future. Here is a framework that can help.

1. Define failure.

Failure is often viewed as a bad thing; however, this perspective can kill an organization. On its own, failure is a loaded term that implies fear of risk and punishment when things go wrong. Take the example of a child wobbling across a balance bar, high off the ground in a play park. The temptation as a nervous parent is to shout for them to be careful and come down before they get hurt (which makes them more likely to fall) rather than guide them step by step.

Organizations need to stop being scared parents, instilling fear of failure into employees. Rather, they need to encourage them to persevere and consider how even the most daunting experiences can help them grow. When you define failure as a loop of learning and feedback, it takes away the enormity of the concept and growth begins.

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2. Frame it (and reframe it).

Once you define failure, frame it in the context of learning — particularly experiential learning, as we know that **70 percent of learning happens on the job, 20 percent through mentoring and 10 percent through training**. When projects haven't worked, a root cause analysis is crucial to define what went well and what didn't go quite so well (*not* what went "wrong").

Professor **Amy C. Edmondson** identifies a spectrum of reasons for failure: Sometimes you are negligent, sometimes you make a mistake, sometimes you take a risk — so what is it exactly? Make a habit of asking, "What worked, what could have been different and, crucially, what have I learned for the future?" If someone comes to you saying they have failed, you might reply, "You didn't fail, you just" It may be experimentation. It may be that they need more data.

3. Create an "unboss" culture.

One of my favorite books, "**Unboss**," by Lars Kolind and Jacob Bøtter, takes a simple premise: Give people passion and purpose in their work and they will thrive. Banish fear of failure and instead say, "You are in charge, you are smart, I trust you."

It is so appropriate to draw on "Unboss" during COVID times because, as the new CEMS research points out, business leaders who are able to create an environment of psychological safety for employees will thrive. As you guide leaders within your organization to create psychologically safe environments, you can also make sure learners at all levels have space to experiment. The more psychologically safe the environment, the less fearful people will be of failure. Through her research, Edmondson **has discovered** that where high levels of psychological safety and accountability intersect, learning and growth happen, creating a "learning zone."

4. Place yourself at the heart of culture change.

There are practical steps you can take to create a culture in which failure is a learning experience. Reward risk-taking and embed it into company processes, such as recruitment and performance management. Establish peer feedback as an institutional part of team meetings, where people bring struggles to the table. Put reverse mentoring schemes in place — a practical way to help senior people learn while creating a safe environment for more junior employees.

You can also do a sweep of the organization to eliminate words such as "failure." Banish negative rhetoric, placing positive language at the heart of your organizational culture and processes, which always seek improvement. Don't ask, "Who did it?" Instead ask, "What happened?" Putting things into context is also important. I have seen people think they have failed after speaking up in a meeting about something they believed in and being shut down by their boss or a colleague. In essence, they were actually being courageous for standing up for their values when others may not have had the courage. Whatever you define failure to be, make sure you use the same language company-wide so that positive sentiment is embedded into processes.

5. Tell stories.

Storytelling is another essential part of culture change. The more anecdotes you can provide for staff, whether in a meeting, during training sessions or in informal mentoring, the better. These stories should not only be about success, but also what didn't go according to plan and how the experience aided growth. A CEO I worked with once advised me to "learn to fail when you are successful" — and it is helpful to hear from organizations that have done just that. Audrey Clegg, group talent director at Coca-Cola Hellenic, in her contribution to the new CEMS report, describes how they have "seen a move away from 'corporate speak' to a more authentic style of leadership — more of us sharing personal stories with our teams, for example."

6. Know yourself as a CLO.

In order to steer company culture and nurture others, you must feel confident managing situations that don't go according to plan. Ask yourself what you are afraid of and when you feel you have failed (as that is often where the fear of risk-taking starts). This comes back to purpose and knowing your values, strengths and weaknesses. Once you know this, you can lead by example, sharing your own triumphs and mistakes.

7. Repeat.

Make sure you continue on this journey to reframe failure. Don't backtrack. The key to building a culture in which failure is seen as a learning experience and strategic risk-taking is both encouraged and rewarded is to remain consistent in your approach.



Sunita Malhotra is a professor at Louvain School of Management in Belgium, where she teaches the CEMS Master in International Management, and managing director of People Insights. She is a contributor to the "CEMS Guide to Leadership in a Post-COVID-19 World." To comment, email editor@clomedia.com.

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