



The Secret to Success is Failure

Failsafe Network was founded in 1985, and our experience of over 40 years with failure comes from many different industries and organizations, primarily within complex industrial facilities, many of which serve as examples in our work. Regardless of the industry, all organizations are run by people, just like everything else. **And people cause failure.** Yes, I said 'cause failure.' When we hear a report that human error caused a disaster, most of us get the wrong impression. These reports make it sound as if, in some cases, humans are not responsible. We understand that when you dig deep enough, everything that goes wrong is caused by people - everything. "Failure" is the single most unique subject in our existence. All subjects that deal with "success," i.e., how to build, run, grow, and generally, how to do things, are different from this subject. Failure is disturbing to talk about.

C. Robert Nelms, the founder of Failsafe Network Inc., said this about his struggle with failure, "From the earliest days of my professional life, I have butted up against people who've told me to focus my attention somewhere other than failure if I wanted to "get ahead." "You naive young man," one person said, "if you want to rise up the corporate ladder, get out of maintenance and get into production. Production deals with success. Maintenance deals with failure. Maintenance is a "pain in the neck" - something we wish we did not have to deal with - a necessary evil. "Years later, when I began lecturing about failure and its causes, I was told... "you'd draw larger audiences if you talked about success. Why don't you talk about how to succeed instead of how I can learn from failing?"

"A marketing consultant tried desperately to convince me that if I wanted to try to help the industrial world, I had better conform to it a little bit and get rid of that awful word

"FAILURE." After spending 2 days on the telephone with hundreds of people, they convinced me that, even within maintenance departments, I should not be attempting to market the "value in failure."

Failsafe has over 40 years of experience working with failure, and we understand that failure is not what you think it is. It's just the opposite of what most imagine. If you spend enough time with it, you'll discover the same thing. Failure is the most valuable experience in this lifetime - the most beneficial - and look how we treat it.

Failure is unexpected, unplanned pain.

Failure (pain) is a signal that something is wrong. Failure gets our attention - it pushes us to contemplate "cause." Sometimes, we ignore the small signals. We say, "Well, things happen!" But none of us can ignore the intense pain that inevitably occurs in our lives.

Failure is inescapable. In spite of all our efforts to succeed, we always seem to fail. Oh, we eventually eliminate most of our problems in a given area. But then we stretch things in our attempts to progress, and failure gets our attention repeatedly.

Wait a minute, what's this pain? Failure! Unexpected! What the heck is going on here? Why did you do that? I don't understand! Help, call someone quick! I cannot handle this! Maybe someone can help us! What do you think is going on here? Can you give me some advice?



Failure can be humiliating, which is why many people avoid learning from it. Have you ever considered whether this humiliation is "meant to be"? Perhaps we need to experience a sense of "humbleness" to truly learn. I can't imagine gaining knowledge if I already believe I know everything. Like many, I enjoy learning and believe humility is a prerequisite for that process. Unfortunately, our nature often leans more toward pride and arrogance than humility. It seems as though failure is somehow predetermined to push us into a state of humility for our own benefit, allowing us to learn, since it's not our natural inclination to approach work and setbacks with humility.

Many people think that the secret to success is success itself. In one of the exercises performed in our public seminars, we ask people, *'Do you think it is possible to learn from success?'* Most people, when only given a moment to respond, proclaim, *'Yes, of course we can learn from success.'* They say success breeds success! They share industry trends towards *"benchmarking,"* i.e., copying the success of others, which seems to confirm that the secret to success is copying other people's success. The thinking is similar to that of *'why re-invent the wheel?'*

But wait a minute! Is this any different from what we've discussed above? Who is willing to benchmark? Which organizations are considering emulating the success of others? Clearly, organizations that believe they've already "got it" have no need to change. The most likely organizations to listen to others are those that are struggling. You might ask, "Where did these successful organizations obtain their insights?" To this, I respond, "From failure, that's where!" Our understanding often comes from our mistakes. That's the main point!

No one anywhere, at any time, can learn anything without someone having failed first.

To illustrate how detrimental success can be, consider the fate of the companies we are benchmarking—those that have received international recognition. While these companies may be celebrated one year, they can find themselves going out of business a few years later. What is happening? Are we choosing the wrong companies for recognition? Or has the recognition itself inadvertently contributed to the company's downfall? Are these companies receptive to learning from their experiences?

It seems obvious to me that what is true for an individual is also true for a company. If someone repeatedly praises me, if people come to interview me about my methods, and if I am internationally recognized as an expert in my field, I will begin to feel quite confident about myself. I will start to feel proud and may begin to express my opinions, expecting them to be accepted by others. I might start to believe that my opinions carry more weight than yours—after all, I am the one who has been recognized. Ultimately, this arrogance could lead me to ignore other perspectives, and my ability to learn will suffer as a result.

Success often dooms one to failure because it fosters arrogance.

Indeed, this closed-minded and arrogant thought pattern evolves into a mindset that permeates a culture—whether it be within an individual, family, team, organization, or country. Look for it, and you will find it everywhere.

But don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying this to accuse anyone. We all fall into this trap—perhaps I fall into it more than anyone else. Maybe that's why I feel qualified to share my opinion. **If we've learned anything in the last 40 years, it can be summarized like this: we should approach failure differently.** Failure can communicate with us. In this regard, we all



have a choice: we can either heed the faint, suggestive whispers of failure or be compelled to respond to its loud, demanding cries.

Failure is essential for improving your business, civic groups, children's scout packs, families, and life in general. Nothing in life can be fully understood or learned without experiencing failure. By recognizing failure for what it is, we offer strategies for managing it, particularly in our business organizations, where failure can lead to significant benefits or, conversely, to catastrophic and terminal setbacks.

Failure is often taken as a dirty word, but by addressing it directly and managing it properly, we can transform it into a valuable asset. Just as we carefully manage costs, profits, maintenance, and personnel, we should not overlook the most crucial learning tool of all: failure.

Successful organizations and individuals need to address three key aspects to learn from failures:

- Change people's mindsets about failure
- Learn to anticipate failure, and
- Understand and address the underlying causes of failure.

I look forward to providing insights on how to accomplish these three objectives in the subsequent NetLetters.



“What we ignore grows, and what we condone multiplies.”