Thoughts on Failure: Three Questions to Ask

Just when you think you have learned the essential career lessons, another one surfaces.

That happened when I received the April issue of the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*), a focus on the topic of... failure! It was shocking to see this esteemed publication choose to feature something to be avoided, something considered to be a serious management deficit. But there it was. Every lead article in the journal was indeed on the topic of failure.

This challenged the long-held implicit belief that leaders do not fail. Leaders succeed. However, and of importance, the issue stimulated fresh insights and a keen appreciation for the phenomenon of failure.

Some lessons were clear:
- Thoughtful failure is an important part of contemporary worklife.
- Failure signifies a willingness to assume risk; it is how you learn.
- Risk is an essential element, integral to successful innovation.
- If you never fail, you are not taking sufficient risk; therefore, you are not likely to lead any meaningful innovation.
- Successful organizations must have ongoing thoughtful risk and innovation.

It is often said that venture capitalists never fund anyone who has not had a significant failure. To test this idea, I called my son, Chris, a venture capitalist, to see if this is true. Without hesitation, he said, “Of course it is.”

Hmm, failure as a badge of courage?

Chris said they always ask “the 3 questions.”

1. What happened? (Does the person understand the failure, the context, exactly what occurred, how, why, etc.?)
2. Who did you hurt? (This is the consequences question. Who was impacted by your failure? Was it your organization, shareholders, employees, yourself, your department, etc.?)
3. What did you learn? (Have you analyzed the situation properly, and are you emerging with new strength, new knowledge?)

Consider this example. Thomas Watson, IBM founder, received a resignation from an excellent employee who had a major failure that cost the company $1 million. The employee was remorseful, saying he would leave the company. Mr. Watson replied: “Why would I ever accept this resignation? I have just invested $1 million in your education.” Makes the point beautifully.

With the 3 questions in mind, I knew that every one of us has had at least 1 notable failure in our career, many costly in different ways. So stop and take a moment now.

Quietly think. Select 1 significant personal failure. Examine it in a new light. “Ask the 3 questions.” Realize that learning from that failure has likely made you better and more successful at what you do today.

In this challenging new health care scene, thoughtful and responsible risk is essential and nonnegotiable. Failures will happen, and we will learn from them. The fact was, when just asked now, we quickly remembered our personal example, some likely from many years ago. This speaks to failure’s deep impact. Did we pledge to never repeat the same mistake? Of course. Were we smarter and more cautious the next time a similar decision point arose? Absolutely.

This new look at risk and failure has been a liberating journey. It presents an important lesson learned. It has reaffirmed that true innovation simply cannot occur without some risk and some failure.

And we must learn from them both.

Maryann F. Fralic, DrPH, RN, FAAN is a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing in Baltimore. She can be reached at mfralic@son.jhmi.edu.