

WHAT DOES YOUR FAILURE RESUME LOOK LIKE?

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STANFORD professor Tina Seelig requires all her students to write a failure resume: "a resume that summarises all their biggest screw-ups – personal, professional, and academic."

She insists that for every failure on the resume, the student must also describe what he or she has learnt from that experience.

Reading her requirement for her students, I saw the power in such an exercise and started scribbling together my personal failure resume.

As I jotted down all of my professional failures, I looked back to see if I managed to glean any useful lessons which I later applied in life.

Much to my surprise, I realised that one of my biggest failures (messing up at a business integration exercise early in my career in the United States), led to an amazing triumph in a bigger integration role in Europe.

A huge part of the success was drawn from lessons learnt from my first failure.

Apart from that, I have also failed miserably in a business entrepreneurial venture while at university. The key part of that failure was due to me being poor at inventory management.

In my first operational role running a business unit, I applied much of the lessons learnt from my inventory management mistakes and was extremely successful in turning a business around.

Humiliation, disappointment, discomfiture, shame, and hurt are all natural results of failure.

Failure feels bad, and it has never sat well with me. Yet, we all know that it is a necessary part of growth.

Many people today talk about failure and its importance, but most people don't realise that you really learn only when you mine lessons from your experiences in failure.

It is not about failing, but about learning. An anonymous saying goes, "failure is only the opportunity to begin again – this time more wisely."

LESSONS FROM FAILURE

Seelig makes this "resume" assignment mandatory, as "failures increase the chance that you won't make the same mistake again. Failures are also a sign that you have taken on challenges that expand your skills."

In fact, many successful people believe that if you aren't failing sometimes, then you aren't taking enough risks. So, if you want more successes, you are going to have to tolerate more failures along the way.

James Joyce once wrote that "mistakes are the portals of discovery". Such is the paradox of leadership – we can only succeed by experiencing failure.

Regardless of our role in the organisation, from CEO to mailroom clerk, we all make mistakes. The key question is: Do we take time to firstly identify our mistakes and then learn from those incidents?

FAILURE MAKETH MAN

WRITING A FAILURE RESUME

Most resumes focus solely on successes; they overlook failures that probably had major impact on who we have become and a possible factor for our future victories.

In fact, many interviewers today ask questions like, "tell us about your weaknesses" or "provide us with a few examples of where things didn't go the way you planned, and what you learnt from them".

Having a failure resume helps you answer many of these questions and shows that you have the humility to learn from your failure.

The failure resume essentially lists each of your mistakes or failings.

A failure resume keeps your humility in check. Looking back at my failures has helped me empathise with others. I used to stress out significantly every time I failed.

Today, as I look back at my numerous shortcomings and mistakes, I don't worry too much.

I just figure out how to learn from it. This has helped me mature significantly.

So how do you do it? Writing a failure resume is a four-step process:

Column 1: Write down the major failures in your life

Column 2: Mention why have you failed

Column 3: State how you have failed

Column 4: Outline the lessons learnt

LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Other than writing a failure resume, reflecting on our failures should also be done periodically.

Every month, quarter or year, spend a few hours looking back at your professional, social and personal life to see where mistakes were made.

Here are some steps we can take to benefit from these failures:

1 TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR FAILURE

Failures in our lives are never totally our own fault. They are a combination of various factors.

It is easy to blame others for our

failures. I have done that many times in good conscience as it was clear the failure was caused by various external factors.

Yet, in spite of this, you need to look closely at every failure and see how YOU contributed to it (i.e. what should you have done differently?).

Great leaders never blame others for their failures. They take total ownership of their failure.

2 APOLOGISE QUICKLY AND 'FIX' YOUR MISTAKE

Admitting your mistake is helpful. However, you need to address the issue and remedy the error (as best possible).

By admitting mistakes, we not only unburden ourselves emotionally, but also showcase our humanity and vulnerability to others. This is an important leadership journey.

In 2001, the University of Michigan Health System launched a programme encouraging health workers to report medical mistakes, which mandated telling patients and their families about errors made, how it occurred and what steps were taken to prevent a similar mistake in the future.

This included a sincere apology to the patient and/or their family and offering fair compensation for harm when at fault.

The result – a reduction in the number of lawsuits and other compensation claims, a faster resolution of disputes, and lower legal costs.

3 UNDERSTAND THE ROOT CAUSE

Take some time to reflect on your mistakes and understand the real issues behind it. Ask these questions:

- What went wrong? Was it a process issue, people issue or something else?
- Where did the error occur?
- How did the mistake happen?
- What was the root cause?

- What contributed to the situation? Did you contribute to the situation? How?

Once you have asked questions and understood the root cause of the situation, you can move to learning from the situation.

4 LEARN FROM PAST MISTAKES

Remember that everyone makes mistakes, but great leaders learn and become better.

You need to ask yourself how you would do things differently in a similar situation the next time it occurs.

Many of us make mistakes but shrug our shoulders and comfort ourselves by saying that we have "moved on".

While that is true it is important not to dwell too long on the mistakes we have made, it is also critical to take stock of these mistakes and work out an action plan on how we could have done it differently.

5 TALK AND TEACH OTHERS WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

From our research at Leaderonomics, we find that the best way to solidify learning is to first practise, then teach it.

Teaching others what we have learnt truly enhances learning. Sharing your lessons learnt with others is also a great way to be at peace with yourself in terms of your failures and it will showcase your humility as a person who not only fails but gains great insights and lessons from your mistakes.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Harvard Business School's Carmen Nobel states that "experienced entrepreneurs know that running a company that eventually fails can actually help a career, but only if the executives are willing to view failure as a potential for improvement".

We all know that while failure makes you a better leader, it really is about learning and growing from it.

Mistakes are life's way of teaching us great lessons. After all, failure maketh man!

