The Tale of Making Mistakes and the Importance of Resilience

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There was an article published recently by the BBC entitled “Failure Week at a Top Girls School to Build Resilience” (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-16879336?print=true). The article talks about “teaching students to embrace risk, build resilience, and learn from mistakes.” It resonated with me for several reasons. First, I think it is important to learn from your mistakes. I have written about the mistakes that I made early in my consulting career and what I learned from in earlier tales for this column. Second, I think that in some ways our society has, in recent years, gone in the direction/philosophy with our youth that everyone wins; there are no losers. (While I can agree that there are some good points to this, we seem to have gotten too far from learning about not succeeding at all things.) Third, learning from mistakes and failures tends to be a lifelong process, and resilience is the key to success.

I think too often these days we strive to make everyone feel like a winner, whether it be in youth sports or in other places in life. This does our young people a disservice in not understanding failure or not being successful at every endeavor they undertake. Why do I say this is a disservice? Because if you don’t understand that it is OK to not always be successful and that at times you do fail, a person can be devastated and not know how to move on from such an experience.

It isn’t easy to admit that you haven’t been successful at an endeavor, and I cannot say with confidence that it gets easier with experience and age. However, if you know how to handle it, understand how to pick yourself up, learn from the mistake, and move on to be stronger and smarter, then you’ve made a success out of a failure. Let’s face it, no one is perfect—we all misjudge, make mistakes, and at times, fail.

The concept of being able to deal with mistakes and/or failure becomes important as students move out of the classroom and into their careers. When I have hired people straight out of school, I have looked for many different attributes; one being some discernible level of confidence. This is especially important in consulting where you need to hold your own at some point with co-workers, clients, agency people, and the general public.

Consulting has a lot to do with professional judgment. This means that aside from the book knowledge gained through education, there has to be some level of logical thinking and the confidence in oneself to back it up. It means that a person is open and smart enough to listen to other opinions and consider their validity. It means the courage/confidence to admit when you are wrong. It also means being able to regroup and move forward after a setback.

Example 1: Proposals
Consulting tends to center around a bidding process, which means being able to put together a scope of work, budget, and often times a contract (at a minimum). You also have to be able to convince another party that you (or your company) are right for the job. I have seen many consultants who can talk their way into just about any project. Where I see it all fail is in the delivery. We want/need the job, so we propose a work plan that is ambitious with a tight schedule and low bid. Sometimes this can be a recipe for disaster if not handled correctly.

Let me tell you about one my mistakes. On the first project that I was the project manager, I didn’t manage my team correctly. I assumed that if I told them how many hours they had to work on the project that they would all just naturally...