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 them 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.

So where am I going with this? I think the BBC article hit upon the right idea: resilience. Being resilient means being able to recover from bad decisions and situations, mistakes, and failures. It requires developing a sense of determination that we don’t necessarily get in the classroom but that comes from living, risking, and learning. The three examples below are from my consulting experience but could generally apply to many different situations.

Example 1: Proposals

Consulting tends to center around a bid 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...
Example 2: Defending Your Work

Let's go back to my new employee straight out of school. Formal education is a good foundation, but that needs to be built upon with experience (building the professional judgment). I have many times joined new employees on a job site (minus the client), and as I watch them work, I ask questions, such as "Why are you doing that?" Or "What do you think this is showing you?" While this may sound like I am being a nasty boss, it really is meant to teach. If my employees cannot explain their work to me, how can I expect them to explain it or defend it to anyone else? My asking a question is not meant to humiliate, but rather to have my employees gain confidence that they can do their job in a "safe" environment without the Corps and the client applying the pressure during a field meeting for permitting. In this example, it is not failure that is overcome, but mistakes are often made the first few times out, so there needs to be a resilience of understanding a learning curve.

A good example is wetland work—specifically wetland delineations. Wetland delineations are especially interesting in how much they tend to be discussed, even if it is to move the line 6 inches. The thing that one comes to know in the business of wetland delineations is that there isn’t necessarily one absolutely correct line (or answer), but it is where the field evidence and professional judgment gives you the “best” indication of the boundary, and those can always be argued. On one of my first times out doing a wetland delineation, I had a difficult site where hydrology wasn’t clear and the vegetation wasn’t helpful since it was reed canarygrass up and down the slope. I delineated the wetland, and then the USEPA representative in the area decided to check it. Let’s just say he didn’t agree with some of my calls. He wanted to see my documentation. Well, that’s where it started to fall apart as it wasn’t overly extensive. Add to that the fact that I hadn’t been called upon to defend my work in what seemed to be a "hostile" environment, and I fell apart. This didn’t exactly sit well with the client.

I found out later that this USEPA person just liked a good discussion, and had I given him one, he would have been fine. From that point on, I made sure that my documentation was complete and started requiring all my employees to be able to explain their work to me prior to sending them out with anyone else.

Example 3: Public Meetings

Throughout my career, I worked on large projects that lent themselves to Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) or similar documents on the state level and thus a public meeting process. While I have many examples of public meetings, let me provide just a few that were extremely educational for me and provided opportunities to learn about myself and how to better do my job.

Sometimes you feel like you are the bad guy. I was the point person on a small road extension project and was required to talk about it during a city council meeting. We expected comments, but what I didn’t expect was the woman who, for 20 years, had planted a garden at the dead end where the road stopped. Now we were taking away her pride and joy. The land wasn’t hers, but I couldn’t help but feel that we were taking part of her life away. She spent most of her testimony in tears along with other people in the audience. In the end, I had to be the one to tell her that the land was never hers to begin with and the road was going to be built regardless of her caring for it for 20 years. I didn’t have a lot of friends walking out of that meeting.

Sometimes people shout at you, and you are accused of all sorts of unkind things. Another project involved a development with a “big box” store (a WalMart or Home Depot sort of store). Due to the size of the development, it was also highly contentious in the community. We needed to present a report at a city council meeting, and I decided to have the person who had done a lot of the field work do the presentation. He did a great job with the presentation but not so well with the questions, which were fairly nasty. Even people on the council were not very nice. When they accused my employee of not knowing what he was talking about, I took over the conversation. My employee was horrified that people in a public meeting would treat him that way, and while I too found it distasteful, it is not unusual since land use decisions tend to get very emotional. This was something my employee needed exposure to and the resilience to come back from. I am happy to say that he owns his own successful consulting firm these days and is doing great work.

The overall message of this tale is to understand that we all make mistakes and fail (or feel like we have failed) in what we are trying to accomplish sometimes. We also find ourselves in situations that we would rather not be in. I believe that while these instances are not overall outstanding moments in our careers, they can and do lead to those outstanding moments when we learn from them. Don’t be too afraid to take some risks, be resilient with the lessons learned, and turn those lessons into success!

Do you have a tale you’d like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you’ve had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Ferris at dferris@sciencesocieties.org. You may remain anonymous if you like.