

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



By Fusi Akinkugbe

Handling Failure

– 4 Lessons

FAILURE is a subject no one likes to talk about. In the hyper competitive world in which we live, failure is derided and those who fail find it difficult to hold their heads up. It takes courage and confidence to fail and still stand tall. Leaders are not immune from failure as they too can make mistakes, show poor judgment, or experience character failure. In a world in which success is greatly prized and failure is often despised, how should we handle failure if we want to grow as leaders? Here are four lessons about failure that will help us.

First, failure is a reality of life. Alex Ferguson, the successful manager who led Manchester United Football Club to many successes, said “..we are all haunted by failure”. There is no leader who will admit that they are not familiar with failure to some extent. No one wins all the time, and there is no one who has become a successful leader who has not had their own share of failures.

Abraham Lincoln described himself as being “too familiar with disappointments”. His life up until the time he said this and even after was not without failure, yet he eventually became President. Failure is a reality of life, because to no one is success guaranteed. Likewise, there is no successful organisation or entity that did not experience failure as part of its journey. Nobody deliberately fails, but it is an inevitable stop on our journey that can occur whether we intended it or not. So don't be too hard on yourself or allow others to judge you if you fail or have failed: it is a reality of life.

Secondly, leaders are resilient in the face of failure. A quote attributed to Winston Churchill says: “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Leaders must be resilient: they must be able to recover and keep moving forward in the face of failure and adverse situations. This is more so if they find that failure becomes recurring. Effective leaders in such circumstances must recover and keep going. When Abraham Lincoln was going for his first election to the state legislature, he said he was not intimidated by failure. The challenges, hardship and tragedies of his own personal life had prepared him to deal with failure. In fact, he warned that it was not until he had tried unsuccessfully about five or six times to get elected would he eventually give up! This was clearly somebody ready to fail repeatedly, so he could succeed.

Have you experienced failure repeatedly and have become “familiar with disappointments” like Lincoln was? Or perhaps you have experienced just one disappointment or failure and find you cannot make progress because of it? To overcome failure we must be resilient, which is being able to endure patiently going from failure to failure before we eventually succeed. Becoming a leader truly requires strength mentally and emotionally, because failure and rejection lie on the path to leadership.

Thirdly, leaders learn from failure. “The old adage that you learn more from defeats than you do from victories has certainly been true for me.” – Alex Ferguson. There are lessons that can only be learned from a loss that will not be learned from victory. When we experience failure, we must be able to reflect on what happened – this is the only way we will learn from failure and become better because of it. David Rubenstein, billionaire businessman, philanthropist, and host of The David Ruben-

stein Show on Bloomberg Television, says those who want to be leaders need to learn how to fail. In his words: “...failing is good because you'll pick yourself up, you'll learn from it.”

There is always a lesson to be learned from failure – whether ours or the failure of others. For our own failures however, if we don't humble ourselves to look for the lesson, we will not learn it and we set ourselves up to continue failing in that area and in that same way. Failure is an ingredient for success, which is why Rubenstein stresses that it is important to experience it: “if you've never failed in life, you're not likely to be that successful in life.” No one looks for failure, but when it happens it teaches us things we could otherwise never have learned, which leverages us for success in future.

Lastly, when the team fails, the leader takes responsibility. “Ultimately, responsibility for a government's failure rests with the prime minister”¹⁶ – Lee Kuan Yew.

Leadership is peculiar in at least one respect – when a team is successful, the credit is (or should be) shared by all. However, if the team fails, the responsibility rests on the leader. A leader who looks to apportion blame among his or her team in the event of failure is only compounding his failure. When a leader tries to shift the blame for failure to other members of his team without taking responsibility himself, he is undermining further commitment by his team members to any initiatives in future. When people in the event of failure feel they are “thrown under the bus” by their leader, it impacts how much they are ready to put themselves out in future. This is not to say a leader cannot point out where there might be mistakes and errors, but the buck stops with him.

Ultimately your attitude to failure determines what you do with it. Failure isn't the end of the world. In fact, it could just be a new beginning for you.

Thank you and until next week, let me challenge you to Begin to Lead from where you are.

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