

Seven Ways to Turn Past Business Failures into Springboards for Success

By Daniel R. Castro

Perhaps your professional life isn't going exactly like you thought it was supposed to go. Maybe you've made a series of bad decisions or even one *really* bad choice that you can't seem to bounce back from. Maybe you've been downsized or terminated. Maybe your best-laid plans have failed and circumstances beyond your control—from market downturns to bad weather to a key player's incompetence—have put you in the danger zone, or even out in the street.

You may not realize it right now, but you *do* have options. You could wallow in self-pity, or remain angry at those whom you blame for your current situation. *Or* you can turn your past disappointments into great accomplishments. How? Just follow the path of the heroes who've gone before you. They will show you how to transform past adversity and failures into springboards for success.

Tip No. 1: Take An Objective, Not an Emotional Look, At Where You've Come From

Thomas Edison believed there were no such things as mistakes, only *eliminated options* that brought him one step closer to his goal. There is no such thing as “failure,” he claimed, only lessons to be learned.

Most people find it difficult to see a failure in an analytical, impartial fashion; many of us were raised to believe that if we failed at something, *we* were *failures*. Therefore, as adults, we take failure personally, believing our lack of success indicates a lack in our character. Instead, we must look at the situation objectively, as a matter of cause and effect. The fact that we fail in business situations does not mean we are failures, but rather that we didn't create the right cause to achieve the desired effect.

If you find yourself in a stuck emotional state, go back and analyze the steps you took and see what you might have done differently. Remove the emotional involvement; just look at the raw data. Logically and dispassionately examine the course you chose and determine why it did not yield the result you wanted, and then consider why it was not appropriate for that particular situation. You'll need to acknowledge what you did that led to the failure, and take responsibility for it. But, like Thomas Edison, you should take what you can learn from it and move on.

Tip No. 2: Focus on the purpose on the other side of the pain.

Happiness does not come from the elimination of pain, but from the realization of your purpose. Keep reminding yourself *why* you are doing what you're doing. Even less lofty purposes, such as “I just work here to pay the rent and my car payment,” can be transformed over time if you look at the higher purpose for why you might be there. Perhaps you will make contacts that will help you in the future. Perhaps you are trying to save money to put your kids through college. The key is to look beneath the surface to find the spiritual meaning.

To succeed, you'll need to look at the higher goals you've set and determine their importance, then focus on what is good, important, and meaningful to you, rather than on the mundane aspects or the things you hate about your job. If you develop a strong enough reason or purpose to keep going, and you can focus on that purpose, you will

succeed at each of the steps you take toward your goal. Without a sense of purpose, you will lack motivation and consciously or subconsciously doom yourself to failure.

Tip No. 3: You can't see the whole parade from where you stand.

You never know from where you stand whether what you are experiencing will turn out to be good or bad until enough time has passed. A seemingly hopeless situation may be exactly the disaster you fear, but it may also turn from catastrophe into triumph in ways you are unable to predict.

When people get stuck in “Why me?” mode as a result of a severe business loss, they require a mindshift in order to recover a sense of belief, hope, and inner strength so they can move on. If we can look outside of ourselves at others who have overcome adverse circumstances, we can gain the courage to believe in our ultimate success. In your industry, who do you know or have heard of who failed but managed to get back on top, perhaps in another industry altogether? History is filled with examples.

Soichiro Honda persevered through countless failures and setbacks, over four decades, before his Honda Motor Company became one of the largest automobile companies in the world. His inspiring story demonstrates the power of perseverance in the face of adversity and the necessity of innovation and creativity in periods of failure and loss.

When we make a *deliberate* decision not to give up, then life seems to present opportunities we hadn't thought of or couldn't create ourselves.

Tip no 4: It's not whether you have won or lost in the past; it's the person you have to become in order to win in the future.

After a business failure has led you to analyze the objective data of your experience, you then need to look at the kind of person you need to become to see the results you want in the future. Beyond visualizing the physical objects or the status you seek, you need to look *within* and say, “*What kind of person do I need to become in order to get what I want?*”

To become that person, you may need additional education or training in your field or another career; you may need to hire a coach or find a mentor to guide you through the steps to becoming who you want to be. Or you may require a character shift, to be reborn, in a sense. Lance Armstrong, for example, had never won a single Tour de France before he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Then it looked like his cycling career, and maybe even his life, were over. He fought back hard and won. Today he credits his great cycling success *to the person he became* as a result of having cancer. He says, “Cancer saved my life.”

Tip No. 5: Accept that falling is a normal part of life, but try to fall *forward* every time—in the direction of your goal.

We are all continually creating our own destinies through the choices we make and our desire and determination to see them through. Perhaps you've suffered a major business defeat such as downsizing or termination. Realize that you can leave that job on good terms with a handshake and a letter of recommendation, or with the threat of a

lawsuit against those who fired you. How you handle the crisis has a dramatic impact on how you will succeed from that point forward.

For example, early in his football coaching career, Lou Holtz was fired from his job at the University of Arkansas for no apparent reason. He could have sued, sulked or slandered. But instead, he shook hands and moved on, keeping the good friends he had there. From there, he went to the University of Minnesota. When his dream job at the University of Notre Dame job came open, Holtz' applied. Notre Dame started calling Holtz' past employers - including the University of Arkansas. Arkansas gave him a raving recommendation and Notre Dame hired him. Holtz finally got his dream job where he won several national championships. Had Holtz chosen to react negatively after being fired at Arkansas, he would have virtually guaranteed a bad performance review, which could have cost him his dream job at Notre Dame. How we react to bad things today has a huge impact on what happens to us tomorrow.

Like Lou Holtz, you can choose to fall in the direction of your next goal, deciding to treat the fall as a sort of awkward but valuable step along the path of your life and career. If, instead of dwelling on the circumstances of the past, you can manage to move on in a forward direction, your fall will send you in the direction of your goals.

Tip No. 6: “Retreat” does not equal “defeat.”

A retreat can be a valuable opportunity to regroup and rethink strategies and goals. For example, one of the worst business mistakes you can make is to continue to pour money into a failing business; in this situation, knowing when to call it quits and creatively develop a better plan is essential.

Don't let pride keep you stuck in a wrong decision. Managers and investors need to be willing to change a course of action that isn't working, no matter how much faith, time, and money may have been put into it so far. You need to be willing to abandon a path that is not taking you where you want to go and start over again.

Captain Oliver Hazard Perry is famous for captaining the ship that bore the flag saying “Don't give up the ship” during the War of 1812. The little known fact is that he *did abandon* that ship! When 80% of his men were dead and his ship was sinking, he paddled a little john-boat over to another ship, took control of it, and soundly defeated the British in the Battle of Lake Erie.

Tip No. 7: Realize that pain and heartache are only labor pains before your birth.

Many people who lost their jobs and businesses as the economy took a downturn have searched for years and have yet to find a job in their industry. This loss may have a profound effect on their sense of self. Like Moses after he was stripped of his wealth and power and was exiled into the desert by Pharaoh, they may feel as if all is lost, as they find themselves doing work they never would have envisioned themselves doing when they were in college. But Moses' many years of exile in the desert was exactly what he needed in order to become the kind of man who would eventually free the Hebrews from slavery.

In any painful, frightening situation, you need to realize that there is hope on the other side of the tragedy, even if you can't see it yet. When you quit, you guarantee that you will not be around to experience that which makes your suffering count for something. Turn your pain into a purpose.

If you persevere, you will gain wisdom and perspective and finally realize why you went through everything: namely, to become a new person, the person you *needed* to become in order to achieve the success you were seeking.

Claim Your Future Success

Many heroes of the past have blazed a trail for us to follow if we really want to overcome tragedies and failures. Remember, just because you may have failed does not mean you are a “failure.” Failure is an attitude, not a place. Get up and keep crawling, sliding, and falling forward in the direction of your dreams. If you follow the hero’s path, eventually you will get there.

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Critical Choices That Change Lives: How Heroes Turn Tragedy Into Triumph.
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