

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE

By Margery Miller

Most people believe that success is better than failure --- and feel guilty or “less than” when they fail. What if there were as many benefits of failure as success and vice versa? Would you be more willing to take a risk?

One of my favorite failure/success stories is about a woman who worked her way up in a manufacturing company from part-time advertising copywriter to president. She followed their defined career path, got an MBA, did her time as regional sales manager, vice president and finally reached the prized position of president and held it for several years. I remember her saying at one point that *becoming* president wasn't nearly as difficult as *staying* president.

After a period of minimal growth in sales, the head of the holding company that owned this factory decided to let the top people go and bring in new blood. She lost her job. She had failed to *stay* president. She spent some time resting, relaxing and considering her options. After about a year, we heard rumors that she was starting a new company. I'm sure she had offers from other manufacturers, but she decided, as many women do who have been stretched to their limit in the corporate world, to do something on her own. She gathered some backers and started a company that provided buying services to manufacturers in the industry – easy to do since she knew all the major players. They are now doing multi-million dollar sales, she is an independently wealthy woman who commands a position far greater than she had as president of a publicly owned company. She is her own boss.

So, what happened? Why wasn't her failure a devastating blow to her?

She used it as a stepping-stone to something else. Not very different from having used the various positions she held at the factory as stepping-stones to reach the top. So what is wrong with failing? From her vantage point, not much.

There were myriad benefits she derived from failing:

- She found out it didn't destroy her
- She used the experience to look at what she did and didn't want in her future occupation
- She learned it was better to be her own boss than work for others
- She let the people around her support her and help her develop a new direction
- She became more independent
- She made choices based on her values instead of what was expected of her

- She created something that she truly loves to do

Now let's look at a success/failure story. Two young men took over a company started by their grandfather, passed to their father and then on to them. They had a tremendous customer following, selling products that were in high demand. They were the golden boys of the eighties, it was as if they could do no wrong. People respected them, assumed they were leaders in their field, looked to them as experts.

Success was theirs --- they made money, they had position and they had few worries. What could have gone wrong?

They took it for granted. Because they had no worries, they didn't worry about their future. They were arrogant, self-serving and aloof. One brother got into drugs. The other brother stayed focused, but didn't seem to have much influence over the other one. The façade started to crack. Instead of appealing to a committed group of employees, they treated them as underlings who were expected to toe the line and show them respect. They would not let their sales people leave the office unless they had set appointments --- it was obvious that they didn't trust them. The companies they sold products for started questioning their abilities and slowly started pulling away. One by one, they lost the relationships that their company was built on.

It took ten years to come full circle, but by the end of 1999 they had a shell of a company, only a couple of employees left and a fraction of their former income. They had lost their lofty position in the industry and were gossiped about.

There were myriad drawbacks to their success:

- They took it for granted
- They lost sight of the basics that their company was built on: customer service and expertise
- They made poor choices
- They relied on their past instead of building their future
- They weren't careful with money and resources
- They didn't build loyal employees, they created resentment instead
- They assumed it would go on forever

If you had interviewed people in this particular industry in 1990, they would have named the company owned by those young men as one of the top in the nation. If you had queried the same people about this woman president in 1996, they would have shaken their heads and said polite things about how it was just too bad she hadn't been able to cut it.

And look at them now. The failure is a success and the success is a failure.

Are there correlations to these stories in our lives? Absolutely! How many times have dire situations that seemed hopeless turned out to be the greatest gifts? How many times have we gotten heady and elated with ourselves only to turn around and find the wind knocked out of our sails --- at first we blamed others, but soon enough we could see our own contributions which landed us in that predicament.

What works best for me is to see every situation as an event --- neither good or bad --- and look honestly at what I did to bring it about. I even make lists of the benefits and drawbacks of situations. For example, if I find myself getting overly anxious about a particular outcome, I list the pluses and minuses of it going either way. By the time I finish my list, with an equal number of each aspect, I can see that it will serve me no matter what the outcome, and I can then be open to whatever happens.

We spend so much time and energy focusing on expectations of ourselves and others, looking for evidence of success and failure. What if we just set our goals and took care of business every day, keeping our eyes on the target, open to whatever outcome we produce? What if we could see that when one door closes another door opens?

If these two brothers from the story above learn from the experience they have had, could they turn out to be much better businessmen? Could they turn their failure into success?

If the woman who is now president of her own company starts taking it for granted and loses sight of the basic values that got her where she is, could her success turn into failure?

How many times a day do we have the opportunity to do just that?

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