The Hidden Cost of Avoiding Failure

Description

Whether it involved playing softball at recess, shoveling the driveway, or dealing with mosquitoes and diarrhea, "building character" was one of the recurring themes in the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes.

Character-building is not particularly fun, but was Calvin's dad onto something?

Is there something about those painful, miserable experiences that makes us stronger? Or does it just undermine our confidence?

Failure-deprivation

I recently read an interesting Slate article written by a staff counselor at the NYU student health center, in which she observes that many college and graduate students seem to have under-developed emotional intelligence skills like conflict resolution, dealing with frustration and ambiguity, and independent decision-making. All the kinds of skills that tend to be developed through difficult, uncertain, and trying "character-building" situations that we would all prefer to avoid.

As a parent, it makes me wonder if in trying to minimize our kids' struggles, we step in too quickly with answers or assistance and deprive them of an important opportunity to struggle, flounder, fail…and ultimately build character?

And what message does it send our kids, when we intervene before they've had a chance to fail, experiment, and find their own way?

The implicit message is that we don't believe they are up to the task. And that it's more important to get it right and avoid mistakes than to make a mess of things, even if they finally do figure things out.

But think about the times when you've felt best about yourself. Hasn't it been when you've struggled with something difficult, and could only put all the pieces together after stretching your wits, physical capacity, and frustration tolerance to the limit?

That hard-fought independent victory can be a huge confidence booster, and an important building block of mental toughness.

The tricky thing of course, is that there are two ways we can fail. Fail the right way, and we are better off. Fail the wrong way, and we could be worse off.

How to succeed at failing

When we receive information that suggests we could have done something better than we did (a.k.a. failure), there's a part of us that kicks into damage-control mode and tries to protect our sense of self. That way we can still feel like we are a good person, a good musician, and a worthwhile human being.

We tend to handle the failure data in one of a few different ways.

1. Ignore, minimize, or dismiss the data

As in, "That critic is totally biased against people from school XYZ" or "They aren't asking me to play because they feel threatened."

Sure, the "it's not me, it's you" strategy might help us protect our ego. And it might even be true sometimes. But this is not the ideal long-term performance strategy, because we're not going to get any better if we remain in defensive mode and can't acknowledge the things that could be improved.

2. Acknowledge the data; attribute it to personal deficiencies

As in, "I'm not a strong technical player" or "I'm a bad sight reader" or "I'm horrible at math" or "I'm not good with faces" or "I don't think I'm relationship material"

In a roundabout sort of way, this strategy sort of protects our ego, in that we will tend to avoid specific situations where we could "fail" again. But in the long run, it just makes things even worse. Not only does it still feel crappy and make us feel worse about ourselves overall, but it totally closes the door on improving the thing we think is unchangeable.

If we keep attributing failures to an innate lack of ability, we limit our ability to grow, learn, and develop, and stunt our performance potential in all sorts of areas where we might actually be quite able – just slow to pick up on things at the outset.

3. Acknowledge the data; attribute it to the failing of a specific strategy

As in, "Wow, I really didn't handle that situation as well as I could have. Next time maybe I will try doing x, y, or z."

Or "Yikes, that passage rushed and sounded really uneven. Next time I could try thinking about _____. Or maybe I could do more work on rhythms. Or more recording, so I notice that stuff in advance. Or schedule more run-throughs in front of people, so I can practice dealing with nerves."

Embrace your FOGs

When I was doing my psychology internship the staff would send us challenging clients, crises, and training sessions as "opportunities for growth." We came to refer to them good-naturedly as "FOG's" (I'll let you guess what the "F" stood for), but embraced them anyway because we knew they were unavoidable, and would ultimately help us become better at the work we do.

We will all encounter FOGs in life whether we want to or not, so we might as well use them to our advantage. To really lean into the FOGs and use them as a rare opportunity to dig down deep and strengthen our resolve, our skills, and mental toughness.

Because while it might be impressive to watch your favorite NBA team cruise through an entire season full of easy wins, when they encounter a tough opponent who *has* faced adversity, you may find that failure has better prepared the underdogs to pull out a victory, because they've learned how to hang tough and deal with difficult times.

They have learned from hard-fought experience that they can miss shots, or get down by 20 points, and still have what it takes to come back and win, because they've done it before, and have learned how to focus not on their missed shots or missed plays, but on devising more effective strategies and gameplans – which can always be tweaked and improved.

In the words of Helen Keller, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

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