# Mistakes: Experiences from which to Learn or Feel Defeated? Part I

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In past newsletters I have described what I believe to be some of the main characteristics of the mindset and behaviors of successful people. By successful I am not placing the spotlight on the financial wealth people have accumulated nor their apparent social status but rather on such factors as how comfortable and content they are with their personal and professional lives, their capacity for compassion and caring, their ability to handle adversity, and the ease with which they relate to others. I have previously examined such characteristics of success as empathy, "stress hardiness," and overcoming a "praise deficit" to help others to feel appreciated.

In this and my next two columns I wish to turn my attention to what I consider to be another major feature of the mindset of successful people, namely, the ways in which they handle mistakes and setbacks. In my various roles as a father, clinical psychologist, educator, youth sports coach, and consultant I have long been interested in how children and adults understand and respond to mistakes in their lives. It is my belief that the response to actual failure or the possibility of failure strongly reflects a person's level of self-worth and feelings of competence. Let's look at a few examples:

A child struck out twice in a Little League game and immediately screamed at the umpire, "You are blind, you are blind! I wouldn't have struck out if you weren't blind!" Interestingly, in the same game, another child responded to striking out by going over to the coach and saying, "Coach, can you show me what I'm doing wrong? I keep striking out. Am I holding my hands wrong? What can I do different?"

A woman was asked by a local organization to give a presentation about a project with which she was involved. She said that she was busy and asked an associate to speak in her place. In fact, she was not busy but rather "terrified" of public speaking. When I asked what terrified her, she responded, "What if I make a mistake? What if I forget what I wanted to say? I would feel like a fool." She also acknowledged that although she

felt temporary relief at avoiding the speaking engagement, afterwards she felt like a failure for being so afraid.

A 10-year-old boy was referred to me because of daily physical assaults on his classmates. In the course of therapy, we discussed his aggressive outbursts. As he became more comfortable with me he revealed, "I would rather hit a kid and be sent to the principal's office than have to be in the classroom where I felt like a dummy." His extreme reaction to the fear of failure reflected how intense this fear was. In contrast, another child who struggled with learning told me, "I have learning problems but I know my teacher and my tutor can help me. I see a tutor three times a week. I wish I didn't have to see her but I know I need the help."

A man was not content with his job, feeling he had reached a "plateau that no longer offered any stimulation or excitement." Yet, when a friend informed him about an opening for a more challenging position in another company, he told his friend he didn't think it would be a "good fit." In reality, he was fearful of leaving his comfort zone and taking on new responsibilities that he might not be able to manage. He told me with obvious dismay, "I may not enjoy my present job but at least I know I can handle it. I hate to admit it but I'm worried that I might screw up in this other job."

As you reflect upon these examples, you might wish to consider the following questions, "What is the mindset of successful people towards mistakes and failure? In what ways do they differ from people who are not very successful or not very satisfied with their lives?" These questions are more than academic in nature. I believe that the more we can understand the ways in which confident children and adults perceive and subsequently respond to mistakes, the more we can help our children and ourselves develop a positive mindset.

One framework that has helped me to understand the manner in which we understand and respond to both successes and failures in our lives is attribution theory, originally proposed by psychologist Bernard Weiner. What attribution theory highlights is that whether we realize it or not, we assume different reasons for why we succeed and fail and that these reasons, which vary greatly from one individual to the next, are linked to our sense of self-worth and competence.

In future newsletters I will address the application of attribution theory to how people manage success. In this and the next couple of articles my focus is directed to the implications of attribution theory for when we make mistakes. A brief discussion of attribution theory is necessary.

Successful individuals believe that mistakes are experiences to learn from rather than feel defeated by. They attribute mistakes to situations that can be changed. For example, both the boy who asked his baseball coach for help and the girl who voiced optimism about learning from her tutor represent youngsters who perceive that they can overcome setbacks, that there are adults available who can provide the support and guidance required to help them to be successful.

In marked contrast, individuals who are not successful and who are burdened with feelings of low self-esteem do not experience mistakes as experiences from which to learn. Instead, they often attribute failure or the possibility of failure to conditions that they are powerless to change, a belief that triggers feelings of helplessness and resignation.

A vicious cycle is set in motion when children or adults believe that they cannot learn from mistakes. Feeling hopeless and wishing to avoid further perceived humiliation, they are apt to resort to ineffective or self-defeating ways of coping such as quitting, offering excuses, blaming others, or becoming a class clown or bully. In essence, their very attempts to avoid what they fear will lead to further humiliation leads them down a path of pessimism, self-doubt, and a retreat from challenges. A vicious negative cycle is set in motion.

Think about the child who blamed the umpire for striking out or the child who resorted to hitting others rather than face possible failure in the classroom or the woman who found an excuse not to speak in public or the man who would not venture beyond his comfort zone in seeking a new job. The common ingredient in the mindset of these four was the assumption, perhaps not fully recognized, that the situation could not improve and if they did not conjure up "excuses" they were leaving themselves open to further emotional hurt and failure.

My clinical practice and consultations are guided by the principles contained in attribution theory. In my discussions with parents and teachers I ask them to provide examples of how their child or student

behaves when faced with difficult challenges. When I conduct therapy with adults I always pay close attention to the ways in which they respond to mistakes they have already made or to the possibility of mistakes they fear they will encounter in future situations. As noted earlier, the behavior of children or adults to failure typically reflects their sense of confidence and self-worth.

Given the number of e-mails I received in response to last month's newsletter about the importance of social-emotional factors in the classroom and the lifelong impact of teachers on students, I have decided to use the remainder of this article to explore how we might assist children to deal more effectively with mistakes and failure in the classroom setting. There is another reason I decided to first focus on the classroom, namely, for many children it is the arena that most elicits anxiety about making mistakes and looking foolish. Subsequent columns will examine (a) what parents can do in the home environment to help children appreciate the value of mistakes as a natural part of the process of learning, and (b) what adults can do for themselves to avoid becoming disheartened by mistakes and instead realize their potential for success.

In my workshops for educators I typically ask, "How do we create school environments that reinforce the belief in students that mistakes are often the foundation for learning, that mistakes are not only *accepted,* but *expected?* How do we create an environment that lessens fears of being humiliated or embarrassed, fears that then trigger sadness, low self-esteem, ineffective coping strategies, and anger?"

Students will learn more effectively and be willing to take more risks such as raising their hands, answering questions, and offering opinions when the fear of failure is minimized. Most educators have told me that even students with high grades worry about giving a wrong answer, of looking foolish in front of their peers. Most teachers agree that the fear of failure represents a significant obstacle to effective learning. However, when I ask these teachers what did they do the first day of school to address this fear before it becomes an impediment to learning, I discovered that very few have actively dealt with the issue. I see this fear as similar to the elephant in the room that no one notices or talks about even as it is creating havoc.

It is my belief that the best way to manage the fear of failure in the classroom is for teachers to introduce the topic. For instance, one of my favorite strategies is for a teacher to ask at the beginning of the school year, "Who in this class feels that they are going to make a mistake or not understand something in class this year?" Before any of the students can respond, the teacher then raises her/his own hand and asks the class why they think she/he posed the question.

The students' responses can serve as a catalyst to discuss how the fear of making mistakes interferes with asking or answering questions and learning. I have known several teachers who have shared with the class their own childhood anxieties and experiences about making mistakes, of giving an incorrect answer in front of their classmates, and of being ridiculed for doing so. The candor of the teacher typically invites students to talk about their own "war" stories.

The teacher can also wonder with the class the ways in which being overly concerned about making mistakes interferes with learning. A frank discussion of the fear of failure renders this fear less powerful, especially when the teacher asks, "What can I do as your teacher and what can you do as a class so no one will be afraid to be called on or afraid to give a wrong answer or be humiliated, so that we will see that mistakes are opportunities for learning?"

Educators who have used this strategy have reported that after an initial hesitation (perhaps prompted by an uncertainty on the part of students of why the teacher has introduced the topic of mistakes), students are eager to discuss this topic. One teacher told me that her elementary school class spent several hours talking about their worries about being called on and looking foolish should they not know the answer. A high school teacher who attended one of my workshops wrote to me that he was initially skeptical about introducing this topic in his math class but decided to do so. He reported that he was "impressed" by the discussion that followed and the increasingly positive learning environment that developed.

As another example, I heard about a teacher who told her elementary school class on the first day of the new school year that they were going to "celebrate" mistakes. She said that mistakes were a natural part of learning and when she and the class had accumulated a certain number of

mistakes she would bring in ice cream for a celebration. Her two colleagues who told me about her said that discipline problems were minimal in her classroom, while achievement was high. By celebrating mistakes, she turned what is often a negative experience into a positive one. When students recognize the value of mistakes, when their fear is decreased, then they learn more eagerly and comfortably and discipline problems are lessened.

I believe that changing a student's negative mindset about mistakes should be a goal of every teacher. This view parallels what I advocated in last month's column, namely, the importance of educators attending to the social-emotional needs of students.

In ending this column and in preparing for what I will cover in subsequent newsletters it might be helpful if you reflect upon the following questions:

"How do I respond to situations in which I make a mistake?"

"What do I do when I face a situation in which I think I might fail?"

"As a parent, how do I respond to mistakes made by my children?"

"As a manager, how do I respond to mistakes made by those who work for me?"

As you think about your answers to these questions, it might be helpful to consider the words of Willie Stargell, a Hall-of-Fame baseball player for the Pittsburgh Pirates, who was asked in a PARADE Magazine article after his retirement what he thought baseball had taught him. His answer is very revealing and captures the positive mindset of a successful person. He said:

"Baseball taught me what I need to survive in the world. The game has given me the patience to learn and succeed. As much as I was known for my homers, I also was known for my strikeouts. The strikeout is the ultimate failure. I struck out 1,936 times. But I'm proud of my strikeouts, for I feel that to succeed, one must first fail; the more you fail, the more you learn about succeeding. The person who has never tried and failed will never succeed. Each time I walked away from the plate after a strikeout, I learned something, whether it was about my swing, not seeing the ball,

the pitcher or the weather conditions, I learning something. My success is the product of the knowledge extracted from my failures."

An interesting perspective to keep in mind.

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