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WORKPLACE FAILURE: MASTERING THE LAST TABOO

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Consulting psychologists often coach individuals confronting obvious or implied workplace failure. They face the challenge of facilitating clients' ability to learn valuable personal and professional lessons from the experience while helping them negotiate the negative psychological, emotional, and practical consequences of failure in the healthiest way. This article provides a model for understanding failure that can facilitate consultants' effectiveness. The model proposes that there are 3 key steps to successfully negotiating a failure experience: recognizing that failure has occurred, restoring and/or maintaining emotional equilibrium, and learning the appropriate lessons so that one can move forward as a more effective worker. In describing these steps, the article examines the relationship of failure to psychological variables such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, and attribution. The authors outline the role that a consulting psychologist can play in assisting someone to successfully negotiate these steps.

Keywords: work failure, executive coaching, workplace coaching

Failure is an inevitable part of the work experience, even in the lives of very successful and highly respected people (Axelton, 1998; Diller, 1995). It has been estimated that currently at least 50% of executives fail in their jobs (Burke, 2004). Negotiating a significant failure can be a harrowing experience (Finkelstein, 2003; Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988). On the basis of in-depth interviews with people who identified themselves as experiencing significant work failures, Slocum, Ragan, and Casey (2002) proposed that failing executives traversed the stages often associated with accepting death: denial, anger,

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bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The individuals interviewed by Hyatt and Gottlieb (1988) experienced predictable stages of shock, fear, anger and blame, shame, and despair. Despite (or potentially because of) the challenges, people who have successfully negotiated a significant failure describe it as an invaluable learning experience (Axelton, 1998; Diller, 1995; Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988). Successful businesspeople often attribute their eventual success to lessons learned from having failed (Diller, 1995; Tresniowski, 2001). Although significant attention has been given to organizational failure (Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004), there has been little systematic study of individual workplace failure.

Helping someone negotiate failure provides a unique challenge to consulting psychologists. That challenge is to facilitate clients' ability to learn potentially valuable personal and professional lessons from the information failure provides while helping them negotiate the negative psychological, emotional, and practical consequences of failure in the healthiest way. The goal of this article is to provide a framework for understanding the failure experience that can facilitate consultants' effectiveness in meeting this challenge. To achieve this goal, the article draws on a broad range of empirical research in which psychologists have used task failure as an independent variable to study constructs such as self-efficacy (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Gist & Mitchell, 1992), self-esteem (Covin, Donovan, & Macintyre, 2003; Lane, Jones, & Stevens, 2002; Seery, Blascovich, Weisbuch, & Vick, 2004; Whyte, Saks, & Hook, 1997), locus of control (Zaleski, 1988), and performance and learning orientation (Erdley, Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997; Niiya, Crocker, & Bartmess, 2004). It also integrates the findings of research on college students' evaluation of failure in terms of academic performance (Covington & Omelich, 1985; Eppler, Carsen-Plentl, & Harju, 2000; Follette & Jacobson, 1987) and studies of salespeople (Dixon, Spiro, & Jamil, 2001; Morris, LaForge, & Allen, 1994). Finally, the article draws on qualitative studies of failed executives that have focused on identifying the personal and organizational factors that contributed to their failure (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003; Finkelstein, 2003; Slocum et al., 2002).

The model presented in this article proposes that there are three key steps to successfully negotiating a failure experience: recognizing that failure is occurring (or has occurred), restoring and/or maintaining emotional equilibrium and a positive attitude to effectively manage the situation, and learning the appropriate lessons so that one can move forward as a more effective worker. We describe the particular challenges and obstacles that characterize each step. We also discuss coaching models and interventions that consultants can draw on to address these challenges and obstacles. Before introducing this model, we present criteria for defining a "failure" experience and discuss the complex individual, situational, and cultural factors that converge to bring it about.

What Constitutes Failure?

Nowhere in the psychological literature has a comprehensive conceptualization of what constitutes failure been offered. Operational definitions in the empirical literature focus on failure to meet study-specific performance criteria. Dictionary definitions include the inability to meet performance criteria, lack of success, falling short, and disappointing the expectations or trust of others (*Encyclopedia Britannica OnLine,* n.d.; *Merriam Webster's On-Line Dictionary,* n.d.).

Central to all of these definitions is the inability to meet performance standards or expectations. However, it is likely that the inability to meet standards equates to failure only under certain circumstances. The following criteria identify the factors involved in a

psychologically meaningful failure experience. Failure is defined as an experience in which (a) achievement is integral to one's personal identity and accompanying sense of self-worth; (b) one feels a personal sense of responsibility for the outcome; (c) lack of success has significant consequences in psychological, professional, and/or interpersonal domains; and (d) one's personal definition of self, the experience, and the success–failure continuum is integral to the process.

These criteria imply that situations in which failure can occur share particular characteristics. They are situations for which one has certain expectations and hopes. They are situations that challenge one's abilities. The individual feels a certain sense of responsibility for and control over achieving the desired results. They are, therefore, situations that serve as a personal measure of one's knowledge, skills, and competence. These criteria also highlight the subjective nature of failure. Personal attitudes come into play in defining the criteria for workplace failure (i.e., the level of performance standards one expects to meet) and the meaning of a failure experience. For example, perfectionists are more likely to set the highest external standards for success, to be motivated to meet those standards (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), and to experience negative affect when those standards are not met (Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2004). This definition of failure is not limited to work. The psychological experience of failure is likely similar, whether the focus is work, relationships, or any other experience in which achievement is central to one's self-esteem and personal identity. In the following sections of this article, however, we examine the experience of failure within the context of work.

Factors That Contribute to the Likelihood of Failure

As illustrated in Figure 1, workplace failure is the result of the convergence of a variety of internal, external, and cultural factors.

Cultural Values

In the course of human history, the concept of failure in which lack of success is seen as a measure of an individual's personal worthiness is a relatively recent notion that is associated with the emphasis on individual responsibility for and control over personal destiny, rise of commerce, and value placed on the Protestant work ethic. Even modern Westernized cultures vary greatly in the degree to which personal failure is a meaningful label and one associated with negative stigma (Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988). In his examination of business failure in the developing entrepreneurial culture of the 19th-century United States, Sandage (2005) described the roots of the American concept of failure. He suggested that American work culture is based on two strong assumptions: acquisition of money and business success is the hallmark of individual worthiness and there is opportunity for anyone to succeed. These assumptions set the ground for attributing financial and business setbacks to personal attributes, such as willingness to expend effort, intellectual ability, and business savvy. Sandage argued that as the entrepreneurial culture matured during the 19th century, there was an accompanying shift from perceiving work-related failure as an event to a measure of one's personal worth. Cultural values lay the groundwork for labels to shift from "I failed at x" to "I am a failure."

Situational Factors

Whatever the individual's personal strengths and capabilities, inevitably workplace failure is not an experience fully under his or her control. A rapidly changing business

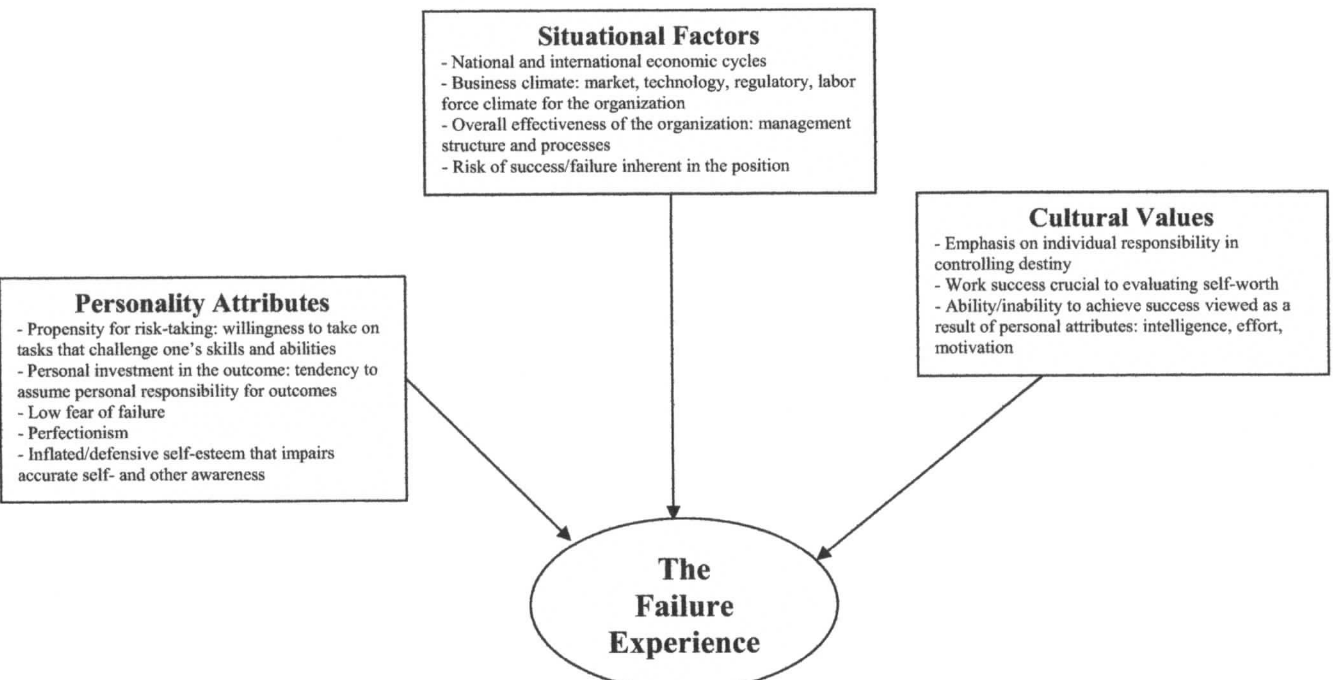

Figure 1. Precursors to failure.

climate can significantly challenge executives who have been very effective in the past. In their case study of the reasons for the financial decline of the highly respected U.K. retailer Marks and Spencer, Mellahi, Jackson, and Sparks (2002) untangled the complex interactions between external changes that occurred in the retail market and internal management problems. Without the changing business climate, limitations in management strategies would not have emerged. Without the management problems, the external challenges may have been more successfully negotiated. Greiner, Cummings, and Bhambri (2003) extended the implications of individual and organizational fit for success or failure by presenting a model that predicts whether a CEO will be able to successfully lead a strategic transformation on the basis of the fit between the CEO's characteristics and those of the organization and its market.

Another situational aspect relates to the built-in likelihood of failure when one assumes a particular management position. Ryan and Haslam (2005) responded to criticisms of the performance of female executives by examining the performance of 100 companies before and after the appointment of female board members. They discovered that women were more likely to be appointed to these positions when companies had experienced consistently bad performance in the months preceding the appointment. These authors suggested that the opportunities available to women often placed them at risk of a "glass cliff" by making them prove themselves in tougher circumstances than those available to their male peers.

Personality Characteristics

Some people are more likely to experience failure than others. It has long been suggested that people with high fear of failure are less likely to pursue achievement opportunities and thus may be less likely to actually fail (Atkinson & Feather, 1966). Failure is more likely to the extent that people are willing to risk taking on challenges that test their abilities, have uncertain outcomes that are dependent on their actions, and entail personal psychological investment in the outcome. Level of self-esteem and self-efficacy are likely to be crucial mediating variables in the willingness to take those risks. Indeed, research has suggested that people with high self-esteem and high self-efficacy possess qualities that are likely to lead to success, even in risky situations. They are more likely to have confidence in their ability to succeed, to put in more sustained effort, and to persevere in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1977; McFarlin, Baumeister, & Blascovich, 1984). People with high self-esteem are also more likely to use situational cues, such as evidence of failure and presence of alternatives, to evaluate how long to persist (DiPaula & Campbell, 2002). Wansink (2000) argued that people with high self-esteem are more likely to experience success because they are better at self-regulation. That is, they are more likely to select relevant goals that are consistent with their abilities because they are more likely to know what goals they value, and they choose to pursue their goals in situations that are more likely to lead to success. They also possess a stronger sense of self-efficacy, positively evaluate their progress toward meeting their goals, and put forth more sustained effort toward achieving them.

The downside is that under certain circumstances, high self-esteem can increase the likelihood of failure. As compared with people with low self-esteem, those with high self-esteem may be more likely to choose risky options when they expect feedback on their actions (Josephs, Larrick, Steele, & Nisbett, 1992). They may also set unachievable goals and persist even when evidence mounts that task demands exceed their

abilities (Wansink, 2000). Their risk-taking tendencies increase when self-esteem is threatened (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1993; Smith, Norrell, & Saint, 1996), implying that they prefer to take actions that increase the likelihood of gain rather than reduce the likelihood of risk. This strategy may lead to unrealistic goal setting, increasing the chance of failure (Wansink, 2000). Research on behavior patterns in executives that led to failure illustrates these potential pitfalls for people with high self-esteem. Finkelstein (2003) found that the flaws for which failed CEOs are so harshly criticized are often the same traits that were lauded and got them to the top. Qualities such as optimism, confidence, identification with the company, rapid decision-making, and self-promotion contributed to advancement. Under sufficient stress and pressure, however, the same characteristics led to behaviors—such as cutting off others' perspectives, making poor ethical decisions, and relying on past successful strategies—that contributed to failure.

Impact of Failure on Self-Esteem

Failure inevitably assaults one's view of oneself and sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. As a result, healthy and often unhealthy mechanisms for regulating and maintaining self-esteem come into play. Even on very narrowly defined experimental tasks, failure to meet performance expectations can negatively affect an individual's sense of self-efficacy on that task or skill (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Whether failure also affects self-esteem is likely moderated by the significance and meaning of the failure experience. Failure in personally meaningful work more likely influences self-esteem (Whyte et al., 1997) than does failure on laboratory tasks. In fact, it may be that the extent to which an experience negatively affects one's sense of self and self-esteem influences whether someone perceives it as a "failure."

Self-esteem is a complex construct. Researchers have differentiated between people with stable and unstable high self-esteem (Wansink, 2000) and between people with healthy and defensive high self-esteem (Wallston, 1994; Wansink, 2000). In people with unstable or defensive high self-esteem, positive self-feelings are vulnerable to situational variables, possibly because these apparently positive self-feelings are actually a defense against underlying negative feelings about the self. Not surprisingly then, the stability of self-esteem moderates the impact of failure. On laboratory tasks, individuals with unstable high self-esteem and those with stable low self-esteem exhibited similar reactions to failure (Seery et al., 2004). People with stable high self-esteem saw failure as a challenge, and those with unstable high self-esteem viewed failure as a threat, apparently because failure feedback triggered underlying self-doubt. People with unstable high self-esteem also had the lowest task engagement (Seery et al., 2004), which has been explained as a self-handicapping strategy to soften the blow of failure (Covin et al., 2003; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Self-handicapping is a self-promotion strategy that involves identifying a potential external cause to justify failure and that also leads to the attribution of greater personal credit in the event of success (Crant & Bateman, 1993).

Self-esteem may also mediate the impact of failure on self-efficacy. Failure seems to have a greater negative effect on the self-efficacy of people with low self-esteem than of those with high self-esteem (Lane et al., 2002). People with low self-esteem also tend to use more emotion-focused than problem-focused coping strategies. This difference may be because individuals with low self-esteem tend to view situations as less controlla-

ble than do those with high self-esteem (Lane et al., 2002). Alternatively, the use of emotion-focused rather than problem-focused coping strategies may serve to further undermine self-esteem.

A third construct that has been proposed in an effort to disentangle the complexities of one's feelings about the self is general self-efficacy (GSE). Similar to self-esteem and distinct from task-specific self-efficacy, GSE is conceptualized as a relatively stable belief system (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2004). GSE is distinguished from self-esteem because it delineates an individual's general perception of competence and ability to perform in a range of situations (Gist, 1987), whereas self-esteem focuses on the degree to which the individual likes and values him- or herself. Self-esteem and GSE may well mediate different aspects of one's reaction to failure. When failure diminishes GSE, motivation decreases; lowered self-esteem, on the other hand, leads to negative affect, such as shame (Chen et al., 2004).

Although the literature is primarily focused on laboratory studies, it has implications for individual differences in the experience of work-related failure. The psychological meaning of the failure may well differ for people with healthy high self-esteem, defensive high self-esteem, and low self-esteem. People are likely to vary in the extent to which they attribute the failure to internal versus external causes, and these attributions may lead to differing levels of guilt and shame. At the same time, the literature also suggests that work-related failure is very likely to directly undermine one's capacity for maintaining and regulating self-esteem, to make one vulnerable to feelings of guilt and shame, and to challenge the strength and flexibility of one's resources and psychological coping mechanisms to manage these experiences (Seery et al., 2004).

Successfully Negotiating a Failure Experience

"Success" in negotiating a failure experience involves recognizing failure for what it is in a timely fashion, managing the emotional consequences and psychological assaults entailed in that recognition, and approaching the experience as a meaningful opportunity for self-evaluation and learning. The following sections describe the psychological tasks and obstacles that characterize each step. Figure 2 summarizes these steps.

Stop: This Is a Failure

The goal of the stop phase is recognizing that failure is occurring or has occurred. Although challenging to make, timely decisions in a failure scenario can significantly minimize further losses. Recognizing failure also has important psychological implications. It signifies an ending point, closer to a death than a misstep, allowing people to begin to come to terms with the experience and move forward. For both personal and situational reasons, recognition of failure is not easy. Rarely are the external data consistent until very late in the process. The self-assurance and willingness to take risks that led to this situation may hinder accurate assessment. The challenge becomes tougher because errors are possible in either direction—staying the course too long and escalating the personal and business costs of a failing course of action or jumping ship too quickly so that there is not enough time for invested effort to pay off.

The goal of the consultant in the stop phase is to help the individual accurately diagnose whether failure has occurred or is likely and directly face the situation and its implications. As a dispassionate and confidential sounding board, consultants can bring an

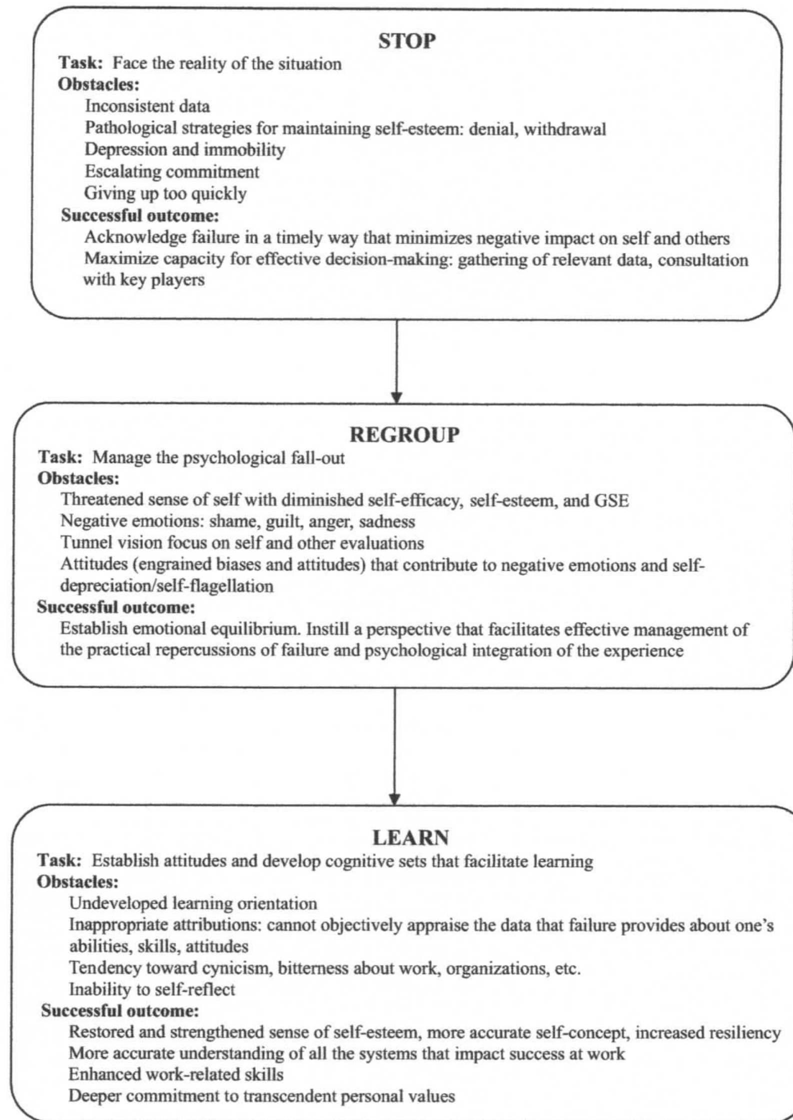

Figure 2. Steps to successfully negotiating failure. GSE = general self-efficacy.

objective perspective to the executive's evaluation of "facts" and an appreciation of the personal cost of persistence that can aid timely recognition of a failed course of action. The following sections discuss the areas relevant to diagnosis of failure and highlight the factors in each area that complicate that diagnosis.

Appraisal of the situation: What are the objective data that support evidence of potential success and potential failure? Work-related failure is a process that takes place over time, often over a long period. An examination of decision-making processes showed that major business failures result from an escalating series of decisions rather than one isolated misstep (Mellahi et al., 2002; Sridharan, Dickes, & Caines, 2002). Initial signs of poor performance may occur long before indisputable evidence of failure exists.

It is likely that signs of approaching failure will at least occasionally be interspersed with the signs of potential success. Psychologists have long known that random, intermittent reinforcement—which any signs of success can easily become—is the most powerful means of maintaining behavior. Particularly for highly ambitious, confident people, these signs may lead to even more investment of skill and effort (Schaubroeck & Williams, 1993).

Appraisal of the individual: How effectively is the individual making decisions? There may be a substantial period during which failure, while looming as a possibility, is an uncertain outcome over which the individual may continue to feel control. During this period, the sense of responsibility that one should be able to turn the situation around may, ironically, escalate rather than diminish. Whatever his or her state of mind, the individual, out of necessity, continues to make important decisions that shape ongoing events and their results. This continuing struggle can further deplete one's confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. The accompanying stress is likely to undermine effective coping strategies, openness to alternatives, and creative problem-solving abilities. Deeply embedded defensive and ineffective coping techniques are inevitable, even in healthy people (Finkelstein, 2003).

Is the individual gathering necessary information? Managers caught up in deteriorating situations tend to withdraw and isolate themselves from coworkers and colleagues. Dissident voices tend to be silenced or unheard; reluctance to share negative information deters accurate counsel from colleagues (Finkelstein, 2003). This tendency worsens when decision makers experience a high sense of personal responsibility for negative consequences (Schulz & Cheng, 2002; Staw, 1976), have high self-efficacy (Whyte et al., 1997), and strive for high achievement (Moon, 2001) and when the amount and clarity of information is limited (Bragger, Hantula, Bragger, Kirnan, & Kutcher, 2003).

Is the individual prone to maintain the course too long? Escalating commitment is the continued investment of resources and effort in losing situations. It arises "when costs are suffered in a course of action, where there is an opportunity to withdraw or persist, and where the consequences of persistence and withdrawal are uncertain" (Staw & Ross, 1987, p. 40). Even as data accumulate, executives may persist in failing courses of action. Strong beliefs that one is an expert and the need to justify one's past choices boost persistence (Schaubroeck & Williams, 1993). Moon (2001) found that people with a strong sense of duty were more likely to deescalate commitment in decision-making scenarios than people who had a self-centered achievement orientation. It takes self-awareness, integrity, an other-centered orientation, and humility to admit, "I failed."

Alternatively, is the individual prone to give up too quickly? Although less likely, people may err by giving up too quickly, when the expected returns from additional attempts or investment are still high enough to offset costs. People may give up because they overestimate the probability of future failure (Keren & Lewis, 1994). People may also wrongly overgeneralize from separate unsuccessful attempts toward a goal, thus perceiving a high failure rate and being deterred from making further attempts (Zikmund-Fisher, 2004).

Regroup: Restore Healthy Attitudes and Coping Mechanisms

Actually acknowledging failure can bring a sense of relief. It closes the door on an often emotionally claustrophobic situation. It signifies directly facing the fears that have kept one stuck. But acknowledging failure also brings its own psychological challenges—

dealing with assaults to self-concept and self-esteem and the accompanying negative emotions triggered by the experience. Understanding the individual's particular psychological vulnerabilities and strengths can guide the coach's interventions.

What unhealthy mechanisms does the individual use to maintain self-esteem? Some people with high self-esteem, particularly when that positive view of themselves serves as a defense against underlying insecurity, use unhealthy strategies to maintain self-esteem. These strategies may have a negative impact on accurate assessment and effective management of the situation. Some people with high self-esteem may have such a strong desire to be positively appraised by others that they focus excessively on self-promotion: an attempt to prove one's supremacy over others in a certain area to be respected and boost one's self-worth (Jones & Pittman, 1982). In their process of self-promotion, people with high self-esteem may ignore important cues about the situation and their ability to handle it (McFarlin et al., 1984). They may continue to persist in certain behaviors long after they become maladaptive and become vulnerable to escalating commitment. For the same reason, they may disregard advice because they do not want to share credit for the success that they are convinced will occur (McFarlin et al., 1984; Wansink, 2000). Ironically, this need for self-promotion may accelerate failure.

Self-handicapping is another means of self-promotion that ultimately is maladaptive. People are likely to self-handicap in uncertain situations (Tice & Baumeister, 1990). People with high self-esteem tend to self-handicap to increase self-enhancement in case they succeed, whereas those with low self-esteem self-handicap to be appraised positively in case they fail (Tice, 1991).

What are the individual's emotional reactions? Success–failure manipulations reliably induce positive and negative affective reactions (Nummenmaa & Niemi, 2004). Failure arouses feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, guilt, and anger. The specific emotions aroused and their intensity likely relate to whether the individual attributes failure to internal or external factors (Covington & Omelich, 1985; Thompson, Altmann, Davidson, 2004). Rothwell and Williams (1983) found that men who had been laid off because of the closure of their factory were more likely to be depressed if they tended to make internal attributions. Students who were asked to imagine that they succeeded in graduating anticipated feeling pride if they attributed their success to internal factors and gratitude if they attributed it to external factors (Zaleski, 1988). When asked to imagine that they failed to graduate, those who attributed their failure to internal factors anticipated that they would experience shame, whereas those who attributed it to external factors expected to feel angry. Hareli, Shomrat, and Biger (2005) found that guilt was more likely than shame to be associated with explanations that could lead to learning from the failure experience.

Emotional responses to failure are also a function of whether the internal attributions are ascribed to ability or effort. Greater expenditure of effort in a failure situation was found to increase the ability-linked component of shame (humiliation), but reduce the effort-linked component of shame (guilt; Covington & Omelich, 1985).

Gender also appears to be a mediating factor in the intensity of emotional response. Women appear to have a stronger emotional reaction to both success and failure (Beyer, 1998). Women feel more elated than men when they experience success, and they also feel more depressed than men when they experience failure.

Individuals who are highly prone to shame are more susceptible to the detrimental effects of failure and perform at a lower level than individuals less prone to shame (Thompson et al., 2004). Individuals with high fear of failure are more likely to experience

greater shame; they are also more likely to generalize from a specific experience to more global negative feelings about the self (McGregor & Elliot, 2005).

The consulting psychologist can play an important role in helping the executive recognize that despite the enormity of this experience and its potentially life-changing impact, it is just one experience in the course of one's life. This role involves helping the individual manage the negative emotions that are triggered by failure and facilitating the individual's self-awareness by challenging engrained beliefs and attitudes that contribute to diminished self-esteem. They can also aid in maintaining a sense of perspective—a significant challenge while one is in the midst of a failure experience. The experience can take on larger-than-life importance, particularly when the stakes are financial losses, jeopardized career, and visibility to one's colleagues, friends, and family. Table 1 outlines potential engrained belief systems, behaviors, and feelings that may be triggered by failure; awareness of these cognitive and emotional obstacles can facilitate the consultant's ability to provide appropriate assessment and support.

Learn: Learn the Right Lessons

Once failure has been acknowledged, negative emotions have been dealt with, and self-esteem is on its way to being rebuilt, the consultant can play an invaluable role in helping the individual become more successful in the future. People who coped best with failure were able to internalize and learn from the experience, seeing it as an opportunity for self-evaluation and self-reflection (Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988). A learning orientation is necessary to achieve this result. The consultant can help instill it in his or her clients, and then move them toward the next crucial steps in learning: willingness to take personal responsibility (Brodsky, 1996; Diller, 1995) and making appropriate attributions.

Does the individual possess a learning orientation? Business analysts examining the experiences of failed CEOs and people recounting their own experiences both agree on the importance of viewing failure as a learning opportunity (Maxwell, 2000; Parachin, 2004). The empirical literature on learning and performance orientation supports this observation. A learning orientation correlates with the belief that abilities can be enhanced through effort; performance-oriented people who hold entity models tend to assume that ability level is fixed (Erdley et al., 1997). For people who hold entity assumptions, failure is more devastating because it identifies a state that they experience as unchangeable. People with a performance goal orientation are more likely to use a negative explanatory style (internal, stable, and global) to account for failure (Eppler et al., 2000) and to exhibit more helplessness after failure (Erdley et al., 1997).

Alternatively, a learning orientation can minimize the threat to self-esteem (Niiya et al., 2004) and reduce feelings of helplessness after failure (Erdley et al., 1997). There is evidence that a learning orientation toward specific experiences can be enhanced, for example, by focusing people's attention on the lessons to be learned from the performance (Niiya et al., 2004). By encouraging focus on what can be learned, the consultant can instill a broader perspective and thus facilitate a sense of hope and optimism that counters the negative self-evaluation and negative affect associated with the immediate experience.

What internal and external factors contributed to the failure? Attribution refers to beliefs that we hold about the cause of success or failure (Rosenthal, 1995). The reasons for any particular real-world failure experience may be found among a complex set of internal (effort, ability, and strategy) and external (organizational, environmental, task, and luck) explanations (Dixon et al., 2001; Morris et al., 1994). Research in this area has generally divided attribution into two categories that are combined four ways: internal and

Table 1
Examples of Obstacles to Successful Outcomes

Successful outcomes	Obstacles			
	Attitudes	Black-and-white thoughts	Feelings	Behavior
Stop	Work defines my worth as a human being.	If I am competent, I can turn this into a success.	Fear/anxiety	Tunnel vision
		If I do not succeed at this, I am worthless.		Loss of perspective
	Success is all that matters.	Success at x depends on me.		Overinvestment in work
		I cannot survive failure.		Immobilization
		If I fail, I will lose everything.		Withdrawal
		This is not happening.		Avoidance
Regroup	Failure is an indictment of my worth as a human being.	No one will respect or love me because I failed.	Guilt/blame	Self-destructive escape behaviors
		If others had done their jobs, I would have succeeded.	Anger	Aggression
		The losses can never be restored.	Shame/humiliation	Behaviors to reaffirm grandiosity
		My career is over.	Grief	
		Failing proves that I'm incompetent.		
		Nothing else matters.		
		I will lose everything.		
		Everyone sees me as a failure.		
Learn	It's all my fault.	I have to protect myself and not take risks again.	Cynicism	Unwillingness to examine both internal and external factors
	Nothing is my fault.	I will not assume responsibilities again.	Pessimism	
	No one can be trusted.	If others had done their jobs, I would have succeeded.	Helplessness	Unwilling to invest in developing new skills
	Nothing I do will ever matter.	There's nothing I could have done.		
		I cannot learn new skills and new attitudes.		
		I cannot change my behavior.		

stable (ability), internal and unstable (effort), external and stable (task difficulty), and external and unstable (luck). People tend to attribute success to ability and effort (internal traits) and failure to difficulty and luck (external traits; Beyer, 1998) as a way to protect self-esteem. Without this self-enhancing bias, one is more open to depression and a sense of hopelessness. However, the downside is that it can interfere with one's ability to make accurate attributions.

The specific attributions people make relate significantly to their behavioral intentions

for the future (Dixon et al., 2001; Follette & Jacobson, 1987). A study of students' midterm performances found that those who were disappointed with their grades did not become depressed or less motivated. Instead, attributing their failure to an internal factor (effort), they planned to increase their effort in the future and assumed this behavior change would affect their grade (Follette & Jacobson, 1987). In their study of 1,200 sales representatives working for a large Fortune 500 financial services company, Dixon et al. (2001) found a strong relationship between attributions for unsuccessful sales calls and behavioral intentions. Sales representatives who attributed failure to lack of effort planned to increase effort; those who attributed it to lack of ability aimed to seek assistance; those who attributed it to task difficulty intended to avoid the task; and those who attributed it to incorrect strategies planned to change their strategies. Dixon et al. also found a relationship between self-efficacy and attributions. Sales representatives with high personal self-efficacy tended to make attributions to more stable, internal factors (effort and ability) in both success and failure situations. Salespeople who are confident in their ability to affect others (i.e., high interpersonal control) were also more likely to make internal attributions and less likely to avoid difficult situations.

Historically, the research has shown that there are also gender differences in the way people make internal attributions about the performance of men and women (Gilbert, 1995; Post, 1981; Simon & Feather, 1973; Weiner, 1972). Most of this research has been conducted in laboratory settings and has shown that participants attribute the success of a man to ability and the success of a woman to hard work or effort. Conversely, participants attribute a man's failure to lack of effort and a woman's failure to lack of ability. This trend in gender differences in attribution tends to hold true whether the participant is rating another person or rating him- or herself. Therefore, men rate their success being due to their own ability and their failure to some external cause. Women rate their success as being due to their hard work and effort and their failure to lack of ability. These findings have also been replicated in the field with male and female managers (Rosenthal, 1995). This difference in attributions may contribute to the stronger emotional reactions that women experience with failure.

What are the lessons the executive should learn? Interviews with people who have experienced failure suggest that the lessons learned fall into three general categories: stronger and more resilient sense of self and self-worth, stronger commitment to fundamental personal values and attitudes, and enhancement of specific competencies (Axelton, 1998; Diller, 1995; Driscoll, 1989; Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988).

Reestablishing self-esteem and building resilience. Failure challenges one's self-concept and the feelings of self-worth associated with that self-image. An individual sets goals and takes on responsibilities with the anticipation of success; those expectations are based on his or her evaluation of personal competence. Baumeister (1989) argued that everyone maintains an "optimal margin of illusion"—a slightly inflated perception of one's own abilities that when maintained within a narrow limit, can have several beneficial results. Failure can be a sign that this view of self deviates from reality in problematic ways. An overly inflated view has contributed to unrealistic goals; an overly negative view has led to self-defeating behaviors. Failure provides the data for realignment between self-perception and reality. That people who have experienced failure cite a resulting sense of humility and self-awareness as contributing to future success suggests the importance of this realignment process (Axelton, 1998; Hyatt & Gottlieb, 1988).

Stronger commitment to fundamental personal values and attitudes. Failure also provides a powerful catalyst for reassessment of one's personal values and priorities. Failure can draw attention to the greater importance of more basic aspects of life—health, family, and friends. Self-esteem can become less tied to meeting external performance standards. Knowing that one can handle failure can lead to a deeper respect for one's own resilience. Failure allows for the development of new attitudes toward risk—an appreciation for what it means to take risks and an understanding that often there is not much difference between success and failure. Surviving failure may also bring a greater sense of freedom in the discovery that others tend to be more sympathetic and less harsh in their judgments than anticipated, that the consequences of disapproval are not as great as feared, and that life goes on (Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001).

Enhancement of specific competencies. Researchers who have studied failed executives have suggested that failure often reflects specific personal blind spots in their self-perceptions, in their ability to accurately appraise situations, and in their interpersonal skills (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003: Finkelstein, 2003). Failure provides a powerful incentive and often unarguable data that can impel an executive to address issues that previously may not have been visible or may even have contributed to success (Finkelstein, 2003). A useful tool to obtain the information needed to improve performance is an after-event review, a procedure that allows learners to systematically evaluate their behavior and assess the contribution of each part of their behavior to their performance (Ellis & Davidi, 2005). After-event reviews have been shown to aid performance improvement (Ellis, Mendel, & Nir, 2006).

Implications for Coaching Interventions

Just as negotiating a failure experience is a challenging undertaking, so is successfully helping someone traverse that experience to a successful outcome. As illustrated in Table 1, failure affects all domains of human functioning. Entrenched ways of thinking about oneself and the world may be shown to be inaccurate or unhealthy. Potentially debilitating emotions can be triggered. Interpersonal skills, management strategies, decision-making processes, and problem-solving skills may prove deficient. The typical goals of coaching—developing self-awareness, gaining new perspectives, and developing new skills—remain the same when supporting someone who is experiencing failure. At the same time, the emotionally charged nature of failure, the complexity involved in making accurate attributions and identifying specific learning lessons, and the multiple pragmatic and psychological challenges the individual often faces in moving forward make providing support more difficult.

Not surprisingly, similar to all coaching interventions, success requires a high degree of basic skills in establishing trust and respect, maintaining clear boundaries to instill a sense of safety, listening without judgment, and maintaining equilibrium in the face of anxiety and uncertainty (Bacon & Spears, 2003). It also involves sensitivity to gender differences in failure attributions and emotional responses. There are situations in which the level of distress displayed by the executive warrants referral to a mental health professional. However, there are also many executives who can be helped by a sensitive and skilled consultant who, although not trained as a psychotherapist, is skillful in developing supportive coaching relationships. Consultants may bring particularly useful perspectives to supporting individuals who are experiencing work-related failure because

of their greater understanding of the organizational dynamics that provide the context for workplace failure, their knowledge of work-related skills, and orientation toward evaluation and development of work-related competencies. Consultants may use systematic strategies that clinicians typically do not use. Viewing the executive within a holistic framework that draws attention to the multiple levels of influence, both internal and external, such as that proposed by Kilburg (2000) and Passmore (2007), is a useful way of conceptualizing what is inevitably a complex picture.

Central to successful negotiation of any failure experience is the capacity to self-reflect. Reflection involves the ability to step back from one's actions and/or a situation and, with objectivity, assess what has happened. Schon (1987) identified three types of reflection: learning-in-action, reflection on learning-in-action, and reflection on reflection on learning-in-action. Kilburg (2006) described the implications of Schon's model for coaching and provided an extensive description of questioning strategies that consultants can use to help executives seriously and systematically reflect on their experiences to develop greater self-understanding.

Particular coaching strategies can come into play at different points in the process. Recent applications of cognitive–behavioral techniques to coaching interventions are useful for transforming dysfunctional cognitive sets and deep-rooted beliefs that emerge during a failure experience (Ducharme, 2004; Sherin & Caiger, 2004). These methods help an individual reexamine dysfunctional personal values and beliefs. In the case of perfectionists, for instance, the goal is to reduce their irrational sense of importance (Ellis, 2002). Work with perfectionists could also focus on adopting more flexible strategies of setting goals and evaluating performance (Besser, Flett, & Hewitt, 2004). These would be the initial steps toward making more realistic demands of themselves and ultimately strengthening their sense of self in living in an imperfect world. In dealing with individuals who have an accurate perception of low self-efficacy, interventions could target raising skill levels and reducing distractions (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

Alternative techniques concentrate directly on an individual's perceptions of self. Raising leader expectations has been found to produce positive self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, a preventive strategy may be targeted at leaders and managers, in training them to boost employees' GSE by providing them with challenges in a supportive environment (Eden, 1990). Inaccurate perceptions of low self-efficacy may be countered by providing information on the specific elements that determine performance—the resources available, the individual's abilities, and the level of exertion required (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

Conclusion

Workplace failure is a complex phenomenon. Its occurrence reflects convergence between an individual's particular constellation of strengths and limitations and a unique set of circumstances. It takes place over time, during which available data are often conflicting and a turnaround seems possible. It involves personally acknowledging the inability to achieve desired results and managing public criticism. Although consultants are not necessarily skilled in addressing the emotional reactions that failing individuals experience, they may be the most available resource as the experience unfolds, particularly when feelings of shame disrupt comfort with peers and colleagues. As sounding boards, consultants can facilitate timely recognition that this is indeed a failure; as

educators, they can instill a learning orientation in the midst of emotional confusion; and as coaches, they can shape the lessons learned.

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