

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/lifehack/how-fear-of-failure-destroys-success.html>

Adrian Savage is a writer, an Englishman, and a retired business executive, in that order. He lives in Tucson, Arizona. You can read his other articles at [Slow Leadership](#), the site for everyone who wants to build a civilized place to work and bring back the taste, zest and satisfaction to leadership and life, [The Creativity Class](#): a place to discover the best ideas on having the best ideas, and [Working Potential](#), where you'll learn about great ideas for self-development. His latest book, [Slow Leadership: Civilizing The Organization](#), is now available at all good bookstores.

How fear of failure destroys success

Trial and error are usually the prime means of solving life's problems. Yet many people are afraid to undertake the trial because they're too afraid of experiencing the error. They make the mistake of believing that all error is wrong and harmful, when most of it is both helpful and necessary. Error provides the feedback that points the way to success. Only error pushes people to put together a new and better trial, leading through yet more errors and trials until they can ultimately find a viable and creative solution. To meet with an error is not to fail, but to take one more step on the path to final success. No errors means no successes either.

In fact, one of the greatest misfortunes you can meet early in a project is premature—yet inevitably still partial—success. When that happens, the temptation is to fix on what seemed to work so quickly and easily and look no further. Later, maybe, a competitor will come along and continue the exploration process that you aborted, pushing on to find a much better solution that will quickly push your partial one aside.

Cultures of perfection

Too many organizations today have cultures of perfection: a set of organizational beliefs that any failure is unacceptable. Only pure, untainted success will do. To retain your reputation as an achiever, you must reach every goal and never, *ever* make a mistake that you can't hide or blame on someone else.

Imagine the stress and terror in an organization like that. The constant covering up of the smallest blemishes. The wild finger-pointing as everyone tries to shift the blame for the inevitable cock-ups and messes onto someone else. The rapid turnover as people rise high, then fall abruptly from grace. The lying, cheating, falsification of data, and hiding of problems—until they become crises that defy being hidden any longer.

Clinging to the past

If some people fail to reach a complete answer because of the lure of some early success, many more fail because of their ego-driven commitment to what worked in the past. You often see this with senior people, especially those who made their names by introducing some critical change years ago. They shy away from further innovation, afraid that this time they might fail, diminishing the luster they try to keep around their names from past triumph. Besides, they reason, the success of something new might even prove that those achievements they made in the past weren't so great after all. Why take the risk when you can hang on to your reputation by doing nothing?

Such people are so deeply invested in their egos and the glories of their past that they prefer to set aside opportunities for future glory rather than risk even the possibility of failure.

Why high achievers fail

Every strength can become a weakness. Every talent contains an opposite that sometimes makes it into a handicap. Successful people like to win and achieve high standards. This can make them so terrified of failure it ruins their lives. When a positive trait, like achievement, becomes too strong in someone's life, it's on the way to becoming a major handicap.

Achievement is a powerful value for many successful people. They've built their lives on it. They achieve at everything they do: school, college, sports, the arts, hobbies, work. Each fresh achievement adds to the power of the value in their lives.

Gradually, failure becomes unthinkable. Maybe they've never failed yet in anything that they've done, so have no experience of rising above it. Failure becomes the supreme nightmare: a frightful horror they must avoid at any cost. The simplest way to do this is never to take a risk. Stick rigidly to what you know you can do. Protect your butt. Work the longest hours. Double and triple check everything. Be the most conscientious and conservative person in the universe.

And if constant hard work, diligence, brutal working schedules, and harrying subordinates won't ward off the possibility of failing, use every other possible means to to keep it away. Falsify numbers, hide anything negative, conceal errors, avoid customer feedback, constantly shift the blame for errors onto anyone too weak to fight back. The problems with ethical standards in major US corporations has, I believe, more to do with fear of failure among long-term high achievers than any criminal intent. Many of those guys at Enron and Arthur Andersen were supreme high-fliers, basking in the flattery of the media. Failure was an impossible prospect, worth doing just about anything to avoid.

Why balance is essential

Beware of unbalanced values in *your* life. Beware when any one value—however benign in itself—becomes too powerful. Over-achievers destroy their own peace of mind and the lives of those who work for them. People too attached to “goodness” and morality become self-righteous bigots. Those whose values for building close relationships become unbalanced slide into smothering their friends and family with constant expressions of affection and demands for love in return.

Everyone likes to succeed. The problem comes when fear of failure is dominant. When you can no longer accept the inevitability of making mistakes, nor recognize the importance of trial and error in finding the best and most creative solution. The more creative you are, the more errors you are going to make. Get used to it. Deciding to avoid the errors will destroy your creativity too.

Balance counts more than you think. Some tartness must season the sweetest dish. A little selfishness is valuable even in the most caring person. And a little failure is essential to preserve everyone's perspective on success.

We hear a lot about being positive. Maybe we also need to recognize that the negative parts of our lives and experience have just as important a role to play in finding success, in work and in life.