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MANAGING YOURSELF



Inappropriate responses to failure can derail your career. Figure out what “type” you are and use these strategies to change your bad habits. by Ben Dattner and Robert Hogan

In his brilliant 1950 film, *Rashomon*, the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa depicts the story of a rape and murder four times, from the perspectives of four characters. The message is clear: Different people can see the same events in dramatically different ways.

In the workplace this phenomenon is particularly evident when it comes to underperformance and failure. An outcome that an employee regards as satisfactory may be seen by his boss as

entirely unacceptable. When a project is an unequivocal flop, colleagues disagree over the reasons why. These reactions, and their effect on workplace relationships, often become more problematic than the original event. As a result, how people respond to negative feedback is of great importance to managers and organizations and is a major determinant of career success.

Consider the case of a pharmaceutical company seeking FDA approval for a new use of an existing drug. (Some

details have been changed to protect client confidentiality.) Wendy, a talented researcher, was put in charge of the large-scale data analysis required to file an application. She considered several approaches and recommended the one she thought best balanced the need for accuracy and comprehensiveness with the imperative to complete the work quickly and on budget. Her boss, George—the company’s head statistician—agreed with the plan, and together they presented it to the vice president of medical affairs, Don. Although Don would have liked a more thorough approach, he recognized that it would be more expensive, and he signed off on the recommendation.

After months of work the analysis failed to demonstrate the efficacy of the drug for the new use, and the application to the FDA had to be scrapped. Reactions varied. Don blamed the statistics department, and especially George, for recommending the approach it had taken. George did not think that he and his team were at fault, and he was angry with Don for allowing financial pressures to influence their choice in the first place. The two men struggled to work together. Wendy, meanwhile, felt she had personally fallen short and began having trouble focusing on her other assignments.

How could three people have such different views of the same situation?

A Matter of Type

Personality psychology provides a research-based behavioral science framework for identifying and analyzing

Recognize Your Type



The 11 personalities below have dysfunctional reactions to blame.

These types represent roughly 70% of the U.S. population.

BLAMES OTHERS

EXTRAPUNITIVE

EXCITABLE: "VOLATILE GUARDIAN"

Overreacts to minor mistakes

Determines failure prematurely

CAUTIOUS: "SENSITIVE RETIRER"

Expects failure to occur

Is too defensive to learn from feedback

SKEPTICAL: "WARY WATCHER"

Believes he will be unfairly blamed

Sees only criticism in constructive advice

LEISURELY: "RATIONALIZING BLAMER"

Looks for and offers up excuses

Often blames whoever assigned the task

BLAMES ONESELF

INTROPUNITIVE

DILIGENT: "MICROMANAGER"

Criticizes himself for even minor errors

Is so concerned about failure that he may suffer "analysis paralysis"

DUTIFUL: "MARTYR"

Accepts more blame than she deserves in order to preserve work relationships

Blames herself so harshly that others typically refrain from criticizing her

DENIES BLAME

IMPUNITIVE

BOLD: "BIG PERSON ON CAMPUS"

Becomes angry or hurt when blamed

Ingratiates herself with her superiors in the hope of avoiding blame

MISCHIEVOUS: "HIGH-WIRE WALKER"

Denies his role in failure; may deny that failure has even occurred

Distorts information to avoid blame

RESERVED: "INDIFFERENT DAYDREAMER"

Ignores potentially helpful feedback

Seems not to care about failure or blame

COLORFUL: "THESPIAN"

Expects forgiveness for any and all failures

Would rather be blamed than ignored

IMAGINATIVE: "ASSERTIVE DAYDREAMER"

Offers complex explanations for failures

Seems anxious about being blamed in the future but indifferent in the present

how people respond to failure and assign blame. Using data on several hundred thousand managers from every industry sector, we have identified 11 personality types likely to have dysfunctional reactions to failure. For example, there is the Skeptical type, who is very smart about people and office politics but overly sensitive to criticism and always on the lookout for betrayal; the Bold type, who thinks in grandiose terms, is frequently in error but never in doubt, and refuses to acknowledge his mistakes, which then snowball; and the Diligent type, who is hardworking and detail oriented, with very high standards for herself and others, but also a micromanaging control freak who infantilizes and alienates subordinates. These types represent roughly 70% of the U.S. population. (See the sidebar "Recognize Your Type.")

The 11 types can be divided into the three broad categories proposed by the psychologist Saul Rosenzweig in the 1930s, which were based on a test that he had developed to assess anger and frustration. Some people are *extrapunitive*—prone to unfairly blaming others. Some are *impunitive*: They either deny that failure has occurred or deny their own role in it. And some are *intropunitive*, often judging themselves too harshly and imagining failures where none exist.

In our pharmaceutical example, Don, an Excitable type, exemplifies extrapunitive tendencies. He takes the statistics team to task instead of accepting any personal responsibility or attributing the failure to the drug itself. Extrapunitive responses are all too common in the business world. Seemingly every time executives testify before Congress—whether it's Tony Hayward, then BP's CEO, disavowing blame for the oil spill, or Richard Fuld, then Lehman Brothers' CEO, disavowing blame for the financial crisis—they point fingers at any organization except their own. Interestingly, long before they found themselves in the hot seat, both Hayward and Fuld were faulted for other instances of mismanaging blame. (HBR tried to



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reach Hayward and Fuld to give them the opportunity to respond but received no reply.)

The chief statistician, George, a Bold type, was impunitive, denying that he and his team had anything to do with the bad outcome. One well-known executive who has been accused of this sort of behavior is Carly Fiorina, a past CEO of Hewlett-Packard. Disgruntled former subordinates have described her as a self-promoting attention seeker who ignored integration challenges and day-to-day operations following HP's 2002 merger with Compaq and took no responsibility when the combined company failed to live up to its potential. When the HP board suggested that she delegate greater authority to her team and more power to the heads of key business units, she refused and was subsequently dismissed. (When HBR contacted Fiorina's chief of staff about this article, she declined to comment.)

Though less common than extrapunitive and impunitive personality types, people with intropunitive tendencies can also be problematic. The researcher Wendy, a Diligent type, exhibited this behavior by taking on excessive blame. This may have been due in part to her gender: Because of their socialization and other cultural influences, women are more likely than men to be intropunitive.

The underlying theme of our research is that many managers perceive and react to failure inappropriately and therefore have trouble learning from it—leading to more failures down the road. Many of us have at some point assigned (or avoided) blame in a self-serving way, only to suffer negative fallout; on the flip side, we may take self-criticism too far, resulting in paralysis and stagnation. To foster and thrive in a productive work environment, we need to recognize and overcome these tendencies.

How to Change Your Stripes

Fortunately, managers at all levels of organizations, and at any stage of their careers, can fix their flawed responses

to failure. Here are some key steps you should take:

Cultivate self-awareness. First, it's important to determine whether you fall into one of the three categories. Several personality tests can help you assess your interaction style. Although the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the best known, others have more empirical support. One well-established model we've found particularly helpful is the Big Five, which measures openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, along with subfactors of these dimensions. It does a good job of illuminating how you deal with failure in yourself and others. For example, you may find that you score high on the *achievement-striving* subfactor of the conscientiousness dimension, indicating that you may become easily distressed if you don't meet ambitious goals. Or you might score high on the *anger* subfactor of neuroticism, suggesting a tendency to disproportionately fault others for minor errors and to exaggerate their gravity. (To assess yourself on the five dimensions and their subfactors, you can take the IPIP-NEO test, available free at personal.psu.edu/j5j/IPIP/ipipneo120.htm.)

Another useful exercise is to reflect on challenging events or jobs in your career, considering how you handled them and what you could have done better. You might ask trusted colleagues, mentors, or coaches to evaluate your reactions to and explanations for failures. Pay close attention to the subtleties of how people respond to you in common workplace situations, and ask for formal or informal 360-degree feedback; you may be surprised at what you discover.

For example, one media industry CEO we've worked with, an Excitable type, saw no problem with his habit of forcefully and publicly pointing out subordinates' minor errors. During an executive-coaching process he learned that his employees perceived him as extrapunitive. He realized that they had a more hierarchical worldview than he did and that he

had underestimated how criticism from him—the boss—might affect them. He also came to accept that small mistakes should be treated differently from big ones, and that feedback on them should be balanced with encouragement.

Self-awareness is also helpful for people in the other two categories. If you find that others often see failure where you don't or if you have a hard time pinpointing times when you've failed, you might be impunitive (or at least risk coming across that way). At the other extreme, if you're constantly anxious about failing or if colleagues often reassure you that things aren't as bad as you think, you may be intropunitive.

Although not everyone has the time, inclination, or resources to get the kind of coaching or counseling necessary to surface and address deep psychological issues with respect to failure and blame, everyone can undertake and benefit from this sort of reflection.

Cultivate political awareness. Even if you've analyzed your behavior and think that you act appropriately with respect to blame, your colleagues might disagree. As the media industry CEO learned, you must know your audience and recognize that each situation is different. Behavior that was appropriate in the past might be perceived as extrapunitive, impunitive, or intropunitive in a new role or company. Whereas self-awareness helps you understand what messages you're sending, political awareness helps you understand what messages others are receiving. It requires that you know how your organization defines, explains, assigns responsibility for, and attempts to remedy failure.

Take the case of a COO who had recently joined a health care nonprofit. As part of a large-scale change effort, he was asked to lead a task force that would identify inefficient processes and make recommendations for improvements. Other members of the executive team were assigned to lead other groups. Because he was very busy with his day-to-

When a failure has occurred, don't respond impulsively. It's not always possible to right the wrong, but it's almost always possible to make things worse.



day work, the COO and his task force fell behind. When the CEO held a meeting to discuss the various groups' progress and share their findings, the COO, a Reserved type, simply described his team's activities, making no mention of their missed deadlines and failure to deliver any results. This made the CEO angry; he perceived the COO's behavior as impunitive and felt that it set a bad example for the other task forces. Fortunately, the CEO was not a blaming type. After the meeting he privately told the COO that although falling behind schedule might have been unavoidable, he had to take responsibility for the delay. The COO realized that the nonprofit's culture was different from the cultures he'd experienced at other companies. In his previous jobs, leaders were expected to hide their shortcomings, not acknowledge them as a means of showing their commitment to improving. The COO had to learn how to criticize himself, appropriately and publicly, in order to succeed in his new job.

Political awareness involves finding the right way to approach failure within your specific organization, department, and role. An intropunitive person might be effective at a small, highly collegial company but have to change his ways at a larger, more competitive one, where rivals might take advantage. An extrapuni-

tive boss who only slightly softened her criticisms when independently running a sales department might have to tone them down further when coleading a cross-divisional team.

Embrace new strategies. Once you're aware of your bad habits, you can move toward more-open, adaptive responses. The strategies needed can work for any of the dysfunctional types. The first is to *listen and communicate*. It sounds obvious, but most of us forget to gather enough feedback or sufficiently explain our actions and intentions. Especially when it comes to credit and blame, never assume that you know what others are thinking or that they understand where you are coming from.

The second is to *reflect on both the situation and the people*. At the end of each project or performance cycle, think about things that might have pushed you or others into extrapunitive, impunitive, or intropunitive reactions. How did you respond? How did your colleagues? Was everyone on the same page? If not, why? What effect did situational and interpersonal factors have on the outcome?

The third strategy is to *think before you act*. When a failure seems to have occurred, don't respond immediately or impulsively. It's not always possible to right the wrong, but it's almost always possible to make

things worse by overreacting in a highly charged situation. If you become extrapunitive, others may become impunitive. If you become intropunitive, others may pile on. Take the time to consider several possible interpretations of the event and to imagine various ways you might respond.

The fourth strategy is to *search for a lesson*. Mistakes happen. Sometimes a colleague or group of colleagues is at fault. Sometimes the responsibility lies with you. Sometimes no one is to blame. Look for nuance and context and then create and test hypotheses about why the failure happened, to prevent it from happening again.

When the talented chief technology officer of an internet company, a Skeptical type, discovered that his department's high turnover rate was caused by what employees described as an extrapunitive leadership style, he resolved to use these strategies. Previously he would excoriate his team if projects ran late or did not achieve their goals, refusing to listen to any explanations. The problem, he now learned, wasn't that his employees lacked competence; it was that they didn't always understand his instructions and were afraid to request clarification. So his first step was to check in with them to make sure everyone knew what he wanted. If results were unsatisfactory nonetheless, his initial response was still to criticize—but now he also spent time analyzing how the people and the situation had contributed to what went wrong. He started taking "deep dives" into failed projects, assigning blame only after careful consideration. Because of this approach, staff members began to share more information with him, which helped everyone identify weaknesses and oversights that had affected results. They also grew more comfortable telling him about minor problems earlier, making the problems less likely to cascade. Morale and productivity improved, and turnover decreased.

Let's look at how these strategies can benefit the other types. An executive who learns that he is coming across as impunitive, as the COO at the health care

nonprofit did, can ask others for feedback about whether the quality, quantity, and timeliness of work products represent success, failure, or something in between. Someone with intropunitive tendencies might make a list of all the situational factors that contributed to poor outcomes. Wendy eventually realized that she was hurting her career by taking too much responsibility for failure. So she started communicating more closely with her colleagues at the outset of a task to inoculate herself against worrying later on that she had acted without support. She pushed others to do their homework, share their opinions, and raise any objections; she also paid attention to subtle signals that she lacked consensus. The next time a drug trial she was involved in failed, she thought carefully about the reasons, soberly considered her role, and decided not to blame herself.

How to Influence Others

Just as important as understanding your own tendencies is recognizing when your bosses, peers, or subordinates might fit into the categories we've outlined. Having insight into their motivational biases and emotional reactions to failure can help you give them feedback in the right way and at the right time—feedback that increases their self-awareness and political awareness and ultimately helps them change their ways. Of course, sometimes dysfunctional people cannot be influenced; if this is the case with your boss, your best option may be to seek other career opportunities inside or outside your organization. However, people often conclude too quickly that their bosses can't change.


The chief of staff at an investment firm had an extrapunitive manager, a Cautious type, who was highly successful and widely respected in the industry but completely uninterested in personal improvement. Like the CTO described earlier, he gave little direction to his employees and then snapped at them when they failed to meet his deadlines or expectations. Although the chief of staff

was not herself a victim of his outbursts, she sympathized with the junior executives who were. She identified one area of constant contention: questions about how to classify investments. The boss typically told staff members to “figure it out,” and the time they spent doing so often led to delays in their analyses. She came up with a solution (forming a committee to create guidelines, which would then go to the manager for approval) and waited for the right time—when he was in a good mood and not too busy—to present it. He agreed, the committee was appointed, and things went more smoothly. The chief of staff had helped her colleagues and protected her extrapunitive boss from himself.

It's also possible to constructively influence people who have impunitive and intropunitive tendencies. Rather than criticizing his new COO publicly and making him defensive, the CEO at the health care nonprofit gave him supportive coaching. At the pharmaceutical company, George helped Wendy see the broader organizational context for the drug application's failure.

HANDLING FAILURE and blame the right way is key to managerial success. We believe the taxonomy we've presented will not only help you see your own role and responsibilities more clearly but also help you better understand the perceptions of others. And we hope this knowledge will enable you to approach failure with an open mind, react to it in a balanced and strategic way, and, most important, learn and help others learn from it. ♥

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