

FAILURE IS NO OPTION!

PRESENTED BY DAYA CHETTY

**PRESIDENT : SOUTH AFRICAN PRINCIPAL'S ASSOCIATION (SAPA)
GAUTENG**

PRINCIPAL: LAUDIUM SECONDARY SCHOOL

Why are people so scared of failure? Where in our personal history did we first subscribe to the notion that failing is bad?

You might be inclined to cite the obvious — it prevents me from getting what I want. It makes me feel unworthy or hopeless. It moves me further away from what I really want.

The underlying aspect behind failure is the meaning you assign to what it represents. Yet that's what it took to invent the electric light bulb. Edison's quote, which has become testament for the power of persistence signifies the truth of his reality, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Thomas Edison reframed failure to mean something greater. His declaration that it took 10,000 attempts to create something which previously did not exist highlights the growing need to develop persistence, rather than concede to failure.

What if to create a vision of something greater required continual failure to get it right? Would you still proceed despite this? Tony Robbins suggests failure is an undesired outcome. I find this an ingenious approach, since at times we want to control things that are beyond the scope of our control.

He furthermore reminds us that failure is a teaching tool and may often delay your progress leading to something greater, "I've come to believe that all my past failure and frustration were actually laying the foundation for the understandings that have created the new level of living I now enjoy."

If you hold a big dream or ambition for your future, failure is inevitable. I am yet to stumble across historical literature connecting those who succeeded with an invention, goal or dream in their first attempt.

Leonardo da Vinci was one such exemption since he created many inventions in his mind. He used the power of imagination and creativity to bring to life numerous inventions in what he called thought experiments.

He reasoned that once it is created at the level of the mind, bringing it to life becomes second nature. Whilst there have been few geniuses to rival Leonardo da Vinci, his biographer noted the countless hours he spent tirelessly fine tuning his inventions to bring them to life.

“Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker. Failure is delay, not defeat. It is a temporary detour, not a dead end. Failure is something we can avoid only by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.” — Denis Waitley

JUNE 1976 – SOUTH AFRICA

The student uprising of 1976 by students in Soweto against the apartheid education system was hailed as the catalyst towards changing the country from a Nationalist regime of oppression and suffering towards democracy.

These students' struggles and sacrifices came at a huge price with many lives lost during the unrest and demonstrations. However, their vision to liberate the country was not in vain. These struggle heroes saw the change in 1992 with the release of struggle veteran and hero Nelson Mandela and the first democratic elections in 1994.

MY OWN STRUGGLES GETTING TO RUN THE MOST DIFFICULT ULTRA MARATHON IN THE WORLD.

In 1988 I was involved in a “head on” collision which left me almost dead. I had broken my collar bone, finger and right ankle. After my discharge from hospital I was left with a limp in my right ankle and could not walk properly. However, my mind was stronger than my body and I was focused on getting better.

With many hours of physiotherapy and going to the gym to strengthen my ankle I was able to walk properly again. I guess my career as a semi-professional soccer player helped with my rehabilitation process.

I realised a dream out of an accident to run the Ultimate Human race called the Comrades Marathon in 1990 to the amazement of medics, family and friends. I completed the gruesome run of 89km from Durban to Maritzburg in 9hours and 40 minutes. Probably faster than three quarters of the field of 15000 runners.

The Comrades Marathon wrote an article about this titled, "Mind over Matter".

Why is failure not an Option?

In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

THE APOLLO 13 SPACESHIP

It was about the Survival of the spaceship and the Ships inability to reach earth. The Voice of a member indicated that everything depended on the power get them down to 12 amps. The Scientists never tried this before. He requested that they use all the scientists to develop an instrument to work at 12 amps.

Why Are Finland's Schools Successful?

Finland was totally destroyed in World War 2 to the extent that they had to rebuild the country from scratch. The focus of rebuilding was not on academic institutions but on vocational skills to meet the needs to rebuild the countries infra structure.

The country's achievements in education have other nations, especially the United States, doing their homework. Finland has vastly improved in reading, math and science literacy over the past decade in large part because its teachers are trusted to do whatever it takes to turn young lives around. Finnish schooling became an unlikely hot topic after the 2010 documentary film [*Waiting for "Superman"*](#) contrasted it with America's troubled public schools.

most of Finland's 62,000 educators in 3,500 schools from Lapland to Turku—professionals selected from the top 10 percent of the nation's graduates to earn a required master's degree in education. Many schools are small enough so that teachers know every student. If one method fails, teachers consult with colleagues to try something else. They seem to relish the challenges.

Nearly 30 percent of Finland's children receive some kind of special help during their first nine years of school.

Finland's reputation for ethnic homogeneity, more than half of its 150 elementary-level students are immigrants—from Somalia, Iraq, Russia, Bangladesh, Estonia and Ethiopia, among other nations.

The transformation of the Finns' education system began some 40 years ago as the key propellant of the country's economic recovery plan.

Educators had little idea it was so successful until 2000, when the first results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized test given to 15-year-olds in more than 40 global venues, revealed Finnish youth to be the best young readers in the world.

Three years later, they led in math. By 2006, Finland was first out of 57 countries (and a few cities) in science. In the 2009 PISA scores released last year, the nation came in second in science, third in reading and sixth in math among nearly half a million students worldwide.

There are no mandated standardized tests in Finland, apart from one exam at the end of students' senior year in high school.

There are no rankings, no comparisons or competition between students, schools or regions. Finland's schools are publicly funded.

The people in the government agencies running them, from national officials to local authorities, are educators, not business people, military leaders or career politicians.

Every school has the same national goals and draws from the same pool of university-trained educators.

The result is that a Finnish child has a good shot at getting the same quality education no matter whether he or she lives in a rural village or a university town.

The differences between weakest and strongest students are the smallest in the world, according to the most recent survey by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

“Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this

Ninety-three percent of Finns graduate from academic or vocational high schools, 17.5 percentage points higher than the United States, and 66 percent go on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union. Yet Finland spends about 30 percent less per student than the United States.

Teachers in Finland spend fewer hours at school each day and spend less time in classrooms than American teachers.

Teachers use the extra time to build curriculums and assess their students. Children spend far more time playing outside, even in the depths of winter. Homework is minimal.

Compulsory schooling does not begin until age 7. Why stress the children when they are so young.

It's almost unheard of for a child to show up hungry or homeless. Finland provides three years of maternity leave and subsidized day care to parents, and preschool for all 5-year-olds, where the emphasis is on play and socializing.

In addition, the state subsidizes parents, paying them around 150 euros per month for every child until he or she turns 17.

Ninety-seven percent of 6-year-olds attend public preschool, where children begin some academics. Schools provide food, medical care, counseling and taxi service if needed. Student health care is free.

Finland's schools were not always a wonder. Until the late 1960s, Finns were still emerging from the cocoon of Soviet influence. Most children left public school after six years. (The rest went to private schools, academic grammar schools or folk schools, which tended to be less rigorous.) Only the privileged or lucky got a quality education.

In 1963, the Finnish Parliament made the bold decision to choose public education as its best shot at economic recovery. "I call this the Big Dream of Finnish education," said Sahlberg, in his book, *Finnish Lessons*. "It was simply the idea that every child would have a very good public school. If we want to be competitive, we need to educate everybody. It all came out of a need to survive."

Practically speaking—and Finns are nothing if not practical—the decision meant that goal would not be allowed to dissipate into rhetoric. Lawmakers landed on a deceptively simple plan that formed the foundation for everything to come. Public schools would be organized into one system of comprehensive schools, or *peruskoulu*, for ages 7 through 16.

The second critical decision came in 1979, when reformers required that every teacher earn a fifth-year master's degree in theory and practice at one of eight state universities—at state expense. From then on, teachers were effectively granted equal status with doctors and lawyers. Applicants began flooding teaching programs, not because the salaries were so high but because autonomy and respect made the job attractive.

The national curriculum was distilled into broad guidelines. National math goals for grades one through nine, for example, were reduced to a neat ten pages. Sifting and sorting children into so-called ability groupings was eliminated. All children—clever or less so—were to be taught in the same classrooms, with lots of special teacher help available to make sure no child really would be left behind. The inspectorate closed its doors in the early '90s, turning accountability and inspection over to teachers and principals. “We have our own motivation to succeed because we love the work,”

A few years ago, Kallahti principal Timo Heikkinen began noticing that, increasingly, affluent Finnish parents, perhaps worried about the rising number of Somali children at Kallahti, began sending their children to one of two other schools nearby.

MY TRAVEL TO SOMALIA

This is a country that has been ravaged by war and destruction. The people live in fear not knowing when the next bomb will explode or who is the next suicide bomber. Through all this turmoil and hardship, the struggle to keep the country optimistic and frustrate the rebels is through rebuilding the nation.

I am the first principal who has ever travelled from outside Somalia to the country by invitation of the state department and the Somali national university to present a paper and meet with the local educators, students and academics and learn about the culture, education, politics and resilience of the locals.

Education has become a great focus and students excel in subjects like Math and Science. The education authorities want to expand their focus towards technical skills and Information Computer Technology development to ensure the growth and sustainability of the country amidst the continuing war. This is testimony to people who don't want to give up under all the pressure. Therefore, when buildings are destroyed by the rebel soldiers the people start rebuilding it almost immediately.

FAILURE IS NOT AN EDUCATIONAL OPTION

Failure is not an option for today's students. Many may fail but the consequences are too dire to allow for such an option. Students who fail earn substantially lower wages. (Springfield, 1995) They have far greater rates of incarceration and drug abuse than do their peers.(Woods, 2000)

Leaders in Western Society have long articulated the close tie between strong public schooling and democracy itself. Schools serves as an equalizer for economic and life success for underprivileged.

A high quality public school system is essential, not only for parents who send their children to these schools but also for the public good as a whole. Failure is no more an option for the institution of public education than it is for the children within that institution. (Fullan.M)

HOW HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOLS SUCCEED WITH ALL STUDENTS

They answer the following questions:

- What should I do?
- How should I do it?
- Why I am doing this?
- Who do I need to be to succeed?

More than any other profession, educators have pursued their calling for a noble reason. What would be more compelling than undertaking a profession that literally places the future of children in your hands.

A NEW IMPERATIVE FOR A NEW CHALLENGE

Schools must develop a culture that are different than those in stable times. Schools like to seek consistency and equilibrium. "Prolonged equilibrium is a precursor to disaster." (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja 2000) Avoiding equilibrium enables living organisms to avoid extinction in periods of great change.

Michael Fullan (2003a) advises educators to "move toward the danger" instead of hunkering down in difficult times. It is better to face danger with a proactive approach than to wait for the danger to surprise you.

SCHOOLS THAT FOLD UNDER DANGER

Schools facing tremendous challenges posed by legislation that requires success for all children often end up using an array of approaches that actually prolong and even amplify threats.

TWO MOST COMMON RESPONSES

- Avoiding the challenges at hand
- Embracing every possible solution to the point of losing focus.

OTHER RESPONSES

- Looking outside their own sphere of influence for reasons why students are not succeeding.
- Seeking a quick and easy solution
- Avoiding or ignoring the data.
- Shooting the messenger.
- Total burnout and utter collapse.

THE TOUGH PART OF CHANGE

Mark Twain once quipped: “Quitting smoking is easy- I’ve done it a thousand times!” Like the smoker who knows better or a gambler who occasionally wins, we can become wedded to what worked at one time or what works once in a while.

The Human Aspect of School Change

Most difficult yet most essential element for success. At time overlooked, minimised or dismissed without addressing the human dimension of change the “who” and the “why” of school reform – outcomes of change will be disappointing.

QUALITY STAFF DEVELOPMENT

According to Dennis Sparks, “Only a small portion of what is known about quality staff development is regularly used in schools. The daily practice of teaching and leadership have been virtually untouched in most schools in spite of millions of rand being invested and a great deal of effort.

TOUGH LEADERS

Many schools use consultants to bring about change. This is only temporary. More than 70% fail or don't last. "Social" is coupled with "engineering" to denote that most managers today, in contrast to their 19th century counterparts, recognise people have to be brought on board. But they still go about it in a preordained fashion. The "soft stuff" is really the hard stuff, and no one can really "engineer" it.

COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy, Courage faces fear and thereby masters it, cowardice represses fear and is thereby mastered by it. We must constantly build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.

Martin Luther King Jr.

TEST OF COURAGE

One's capacity for courageous action can be quickly gauged by this informal test that has been given for to more than 3000 educational leaders since 2002. Imagine you are in a new town or city and are on your way to shop at a nearby mall. As you approach the mall, you discover that it is on fire. You do not know the nature of the fire, only that it began shortly before you arrived. There are no fire trucks in sight.

Would you enter the mall? Most of us would say "No!" Our instincts tell us that it would be foolish to do so. There is a difference, after all, between foolish behaviour and courage. But under what circumstances, if any, would you enter the mall?

1. A big sale is going on?
2. People are in the mall (who might be trapped)?
3. Children in the mall (who might be trapped)?
4. Your children are in the mall?

ANSWERS TO SURVEY

None said YES to #1

5% YES to #2

25% YES to #3

100% YES to #4

As strategy unfolds, leaders must pay close attention to whether they are generating passion, purpose and energy... on the part of principals and teachers. Failure to gain on this problem is a sure fire indicator that the strategy will fail sooner than later.

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

Answer these questions with a colleague

- Why did I become a teacher?
- What do I stand for as an educator?
- What are the gifts that I bring to my work?
- What do I want my legacy as a teacher to be?
- What can I do to keep track of myself – to remember my own heart?

CREATING ORGANISATIONAL MEANING

How do you use your staff collectively in difficult times to rally around you and come up with solutions? Drop things that are not working and learn about how other schools dealing with similar challenges. It could be the impetus for school community that was otherwise isolated to undertake action research on “best practices”.

Maintain Constancy and Clarity of Purpose

In the 1970's advertisers must have quietly signed a pact. All products should now and henceforth be deemed “new and improved”! Educators, like most of us gleefully bought the “latest” and most “improved” lawnmower, car, and soap. As a profession we have also adopted the same regrettable concept – creating, consuming and abandoning the latest educational fad every few years.

In the Apollo 13 the purpose was clear bring the astronauts back alive.

In school the purpose should be how do we get all the learners to pass.

CONFRONT THE DATA AND YOUR FEARS

School communities tend to avoid certain facts and related fears. Many fine schools pride themselves on 85% passing rate on external exams or standardised tests, without examining who is in the 15% that are failing. **What does 100% really mean?**

It is important to constantly evaluate one's position relative to the ideal and to use data based assessments as fuel for continual improvements, optimism and action.

NSC, ANA, TIMMS, PIRLS, SACMEQ, etc

BUILD SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS

“Quality relationships are more powerful than moral purpose.” Story of the burning mall?

Leaders create relationships, and one of those relationships is between individuals and their work. Ultimately we all work for a purpose, and that purpose has to be served if we are to feel encouraged, Encouraging the heart only works if there's a fit between person, the work and the organisation.

7 HABITS OF EXCELLENT LEADERS

by **Steven Covey**

- **BE PROACTIVE** – You are in charge
- **BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND** – Have a plan
- **PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST** – Work first then play
- **THINK WIN-WIN** – Everyone can win
- **SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD** – Listen before you talk
- **SYNERGISE** – Together is better (TEAMWORK)
- **SHARPEN THE SAW** – balance feels best

CONCLUSION:

Failure is Not an Option recognises simple history: a grandmother who was unwilling to give up on her grandson. This is similar to the untold story of so many of our successes with students in schools. One teacher, one principal, one cafeteria worker or janitor is unwilling to give up on a young person, who then succeeds as a result.

