

Bouncing Back from Setbacks and Mistakes

“The only complete mistake is the mistake from which we learn nothing.” (Jacob Braude)

Long-term success for organizations and individuals rarely happens without an occasional setback or mistake.

Becoming flustered by setbacks is easy because most of us believe that our organizations, careers, and lives should keep advancing.

Successful organizations and people learn how to gain control of situations that seem to be out of their control, retool themselves, and rebound quickly from disaster. When we don't have control of the process surrounding us, we have to take control of our lives.

The ways in which we understand and respond to setbacks and mistakes are an integral part of a resilient mindset.

Rebounding from a disaster does not mean mistake-proofing your organization or yourself because there will be more setbacks in the future.

Sometimes we will be wrong. When we are wrong, we have two ways to react:

1. Make bold moves, knowing that some will work and some won't.
2. Make no moves, which guarantees that you won't be a winner.

Resilient individuals:

1. View setbacks as temporary and are not easily discouraged.
2. Attribute mistakes to factors that can be changed.
3. View mistakes as experiences for learning and growth instead of feeling defeated.
4. Do not delight in making mistakes but believe that mistakes serve as the foundation for insight and growth and as a vital source of information for future success.
5. Look for opportunities that might be a by-product of setbacks.

Individuals lacking resilience:

1. View setbacks as permanent.
2. Typically attribute setbacks or mistakes to conditions that they are powerless to change, that are beyond their control, or that cannot be easily corrected.
3. Do not consider options for improvement because they do not believe any exist.
4. Are prone to interpret each mistake as a testimony to inadequacy or evidence that they are failures instead of just an event to be dealt with.
5. Tend to rely on self-defeating coping behaviors such as making excuses, quitting, avoiding challenges, denying, or blaming others.

As Willie Stargell, a Hall of Fame baseball player for the Pittsburgh Pirates, said:

“Baseball taught me what I need to survive in the world. The game has given me the patience to learn and succeed. As much as I was known for my homers, I also was known for my strikeouts. The strikeout is the ultimate failure. I struck out 1,936 times. But I’m proud of my strikeouts, for I feel that to succeed, one must first fail; the more you fail, the more you learn about succeeding. The person who has never tried and failed will never succeed. Each time I walked away from the plate after a strikeout, I learned something, whether it was about my swing, the weather conditions, I learned something. My success is the product of the knowledge extracted from my failures.”

The more you run from mistakes, the less likely you are to experience success and the greater probability you will continue down a path marked by insecurity, anger, and sadness.

Dealing Effectively With Setbacks and Mistakes

1. Examine your assumptions about mistakes.

The better you understand your approach to setbacks, the better equipped you will be to modify counterproductive patterns of thinking and behaving.

Answer the following to examine your assumptions about the setbacks and mistakes in your life:

- List three situations in the past year in which in you made a mistake or experienced a setback.
- Before you attempted each of the tasks, how confident were you of succeeding? Did your confidence level differ from one task to the next?
- When you experienced a setback or mistake, how did you explain the situation to yourself?
- As you examine the three situations, did you have the same explanations for why you failed in each?
- How did you react to each situation?
- With hindsight, would you respond differently to any of the situations now? If so, how would you respond differently?
- Of all the times you made a mistake or experienced a setback, what is the time you are most proud of in terms of your reaction? Why are you proud?

- Of all the times you made a mistake or experienced a setback, what is the time you are least proud of in terms of your reaction? Why aren't you pleased?
- What is the worst thing that has happened to you when you made a mistake or experienced a setback?
- How did your parents or other important adults in your life handle setbacks and mistakes?
- Have you ever asked yourself, "Is there anything I can learn from this situation?"
- Are there times you have refused to try something because you were afraid you might fail or make a mistake? How did you feel about yourself after you refused?

2. Challenge self-defeating assumptions.

When your assumptions serve as roadblocks to leading a resilient lifestyle, they must be defined, understood, and challenged.

Many people magnify and generalize their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, leaving the impression that their lives are a history of mistakes and failures. When they focus on their mistakes, their positive features recede into the background.

Do you fall into the trap of:

- Making all-or-none statements. ("I will never learn.")
- Generalizing a mistake in one area of your life to all areas. ("I can't do anything right.")
- Attributing mistakes to a factor that can't be changed. ("I am really clumsy.")

Begin to focus on areas in which you have been successful, and remember that you are not a failure just because something doesn't work out.

3. Keep the situation in perspective.

- Ask yourself:
 - What's the worst thing that can happen?
 - What's the best outcome we can hope for?
- Work on being accurate and candid about what has happened.
- Take steps to remedy the situation.

4. Learn something positive from every situation.

A vital step in overcoming self-defeating assumptions for setbacks or mistakes is to ask ourselves: “What can I learn from this situation?”

Most mistakes and setbacks trigger feelings of disappointment and doubt, and very few people are glad they make a mistake or experienced a setback to have an opportunity for improvement. However, if mistakes and setbacks reinforce negative self-evaluations, we have little opportunity to learn from what went wrong.

Mistakes and setbacks are a natural part of life. We learn by experimenting, and mistakes and setbacks can be important parts of our learning process. If we accept our setbacks and mistakes, we can continue to risk, learn, and move on with excitement and satisfaction.

The most important thing we can do differently when a setback or mistake occurs in the future is to change the way we interpret the event.

5. Decide on a plan of action based on new assumptions.

- Ask yourself what you can do to either change your behavior so that setbacks and mistakes are less likely to occur or change how you view and respond to mistakes when they do occur. By directing attention to what you can do differently, you assume personal control for your life instead of passively accepting the negative assumptions that have existed.
- After reviewing several possible options to change how you view and react to setbacks and mistakes, select one that you believe has the greatest probability for success.
- Once you have selected a new action plan, anticipate the possible obstacles to success. The more prepared you are for obstacles that may arise, the better equipped you will be to manage these obstacles in a constructive manner with a resilient mindset. As you reflect on possible obstacles, ask yourself the following questions:
 - If you make a mistake or experience a setback in the future, what will you tell yourself? Is this different from what you told yourself in the past?
 - If it is different, how do you think it will affect your behavior?
 - What difficulties do you anticipate encountering as you use new words and actions to deal with setbacks and mistakes?
 - How will you manage these difficulties so that you can move forward?

6. If your new assumptions about mistakes or your new behavior are not successful, avoid negative self-evaluation.

- Return to Step 4 and ask what you have learned from this setback.
- Proceed to Step 5 to consider new options and a new plan of action.

Concluding Thoughts About Setbacks and Mistakes

Mistaken attitudes about setbacks and mistakes are a bigger problem than making mistakes or experiencing setbacks. Resilient people view mistakes as experiences to learn from.

To lead a resilient lifestyle, recognize that setbacks and mistakes are natural occurrences within that lifestyle. Your choice is the manner in which you respond to these events.

As Jacob Braude has said:

“In order to profit from your mistakes, you have to go out and make some.”