Experimentation and innovation are essential ingredients in an effective approach to environmental health and safety. Do not withdraw from this approach out of fear of failure. Fail but learn from it.

Failure is ugly. Regardless of failure’s severity, it is an unbecoming feeling that can linger for moments or for years. Those who are considered perfectionists may experience failure in greater doses and on a continual basis while effortlessly attempting the next task with little regard to the past. Others not so driven to perfection may experience failure less often but with much less propensity to recover and reenlist in the journey for success.

SH&E professionals carry the burden of many departments and with that comes much responsibility. With it also comes a tendency to take others’ failures personally. In many situations, failure may be completely out of our control. What we can control is our predetermined approach to how we will fail and how we will learn from it. Simply dusting off oneself seems like a noble approach to being knocked down in the fight for success; however, considering the specific elements leading to that particular failure can make the difference in avoiding a future repeat. More specifically, steps can be taken to ensure that even serious failure results in success.

McGrath (2011) says, “Be quick about it—fail fast.” By operating in a constant state of certainty and control, we can minimize our losses as opposed to blindly forcing an outcome that will only fail bigger the further it is pushed. McGrath also suggests failing cheaply as opposed to throwing large amounts of money and resources at an initiative that seems promising. Despite positive market research, high barriers to entry for competitors, test product success and minimal startup cost, an experiment can be rolled out on a smaller scale.

For some organizations, a failed venture of several hundred thousand dollars is a valuable experiment if it means preventing a multimillion dollar loss because of not doing one’s homework. The Flip Video camera is a case in point. Purchased by Cisco for $590 million, only to be shut down just 2 years later, it proved to be an expensive experiment.

**Failure in Safety**

Safety professionals in every industry face these types of decisions on a daily basis, especially in an uncertain environment where safety is not or has yet to be an integral part of the organizational culture. It is tempting to approach projects, experiments and new safety programs with enthusiasm and to hope that others will embrace our efforts. Sometimes when those programs fail, we are tempted to completely abandon the program and to try an entirely new program or approach, never to again revisit the previous failure.

Failure can be difficult to deal with, and we naturally tend to minimize the experience as a whole. One failure I personally experienced was an attempt to initiate a new employee orientation video in our initial safety orientation process. This was an attempt to warn employees of hazards until I was able to arrive on site to personally train new employees in their native language, which sometimes took days or weeks because of their geographic location. This turned out to be a difficult task, as I later learned.

The challenges included motivating partial-English-speaking supervisors to show a 15-minute video to their partial-English-speaking laborers regarding general construction site safety. Another challenge was that the job sites were in remote areas with no trailers, offices, televisions, laptops or facilities for video viewing. Other challenges included subzero temperatures, 40+ mph winds, deep snow and extremely muddy conditions that limited mobility and caused operational delays. These delays made it even more difficult to make time for safety training because of schedules already being behind and overburdened. The technology involved in supervisor training was also a challenge because many supervisors were computer illiterate. These obstacles, coupled with a reluctance to take time to creatively accommo-
date the presentation of an orientation video, made my attempt to immediately orient employees difficult, if not impossible, until my arrival. Then I was the one facing the cold, wind, snow and mud.

This small but necessary component of my comprehensive safety program was ineffective and failing. Many safety professionals find themselves in similar circumstances, which can be frustrating in their efforts to train and protect others. My reaction was not to completely abandon this method of initial training, but to refocus and rethink a new approach using what I had learned from this ongoing failure. Many factors exist now that may not exist in the future, which could lead to success in this effort. Different geographic areas, supervisors and executive support to champion experimental programs could make a difference in the future. Timing is everything, and my timing was inappropriate for what I was attempting. However, in the future and under different circumstances, this might be a viable option to revisit. It is important to remember that failure at one point in time does not mean that it must be sealed in the history books. A second attempt of a similar failure could result in success due to the environment, small readjustments and refinements, and previous lessons learned. Do not fully commit to a previously failed initiative without first conducting a small experiment.

**Failure Anatomy**

How does failure occur? One way is to operate based on a superiority complex or with the attitude of being “born of hubris” in which one believes s/he is invincible to failure. Optimism is essential in overcoming barriers and obstacles, but too much can leave one vulnerable to myopia and pride. Overoptimism is the tendency to believe that we are less likely than others to experience negative events. Overoptimism can help businesses and individuals flourish and advance against losing odds. It can also lead people to believe it to be unnecessary to plan for the unexpected (Ucbasaran, et al., 2011).

While most of us shoot for the stars in our day-to-day duties, avert mistakes in hopes of maximizing efficiency and avoid failure at all costs, we all, from time to time, experience failure. The manner in which we respond to failure is of greater importance than the will to avoid it. A sense of overoptimism can be our greatest weakness because we begin to deny that failure is even an option, and in many cases, this is a huge misconception. It leads us to believe that we are above failure and that no unfortunate events will occur in our personal or professional lives.

Furthermore, overoptimism is preceded by the belief that failure is bad, that it should be hidden, is shameful and should be forgotten. This belief could not be further from the truth of how important failure is and what kind of lasting impact it can have in our continuous efforts to develop ourselves to not avoid failure, but to channel failure in a way that will prevent future catastrophes.

**Reflection on Failure**

In light of many current financial and political failures, top leadership consultants suggest taking many unconventional approaches to failure—one that will not make failure a habit but takes traditional failure from just another loss to an intelligent analysis of “what went wrong.” This requires leadership to tolerate a degree of failure, especially in complex systems with interdepartmental dependency, to draw from the experience. Failing is something that everyone experiences in one shape or form, but the ability to learn from failure separates good failure from bad failure.

Umair Haque describes effective failing in his Harvard Business Review blog, Fail Bigger Cheaper, which focuses on the idea that failing effectively is difficult—something that many “fail to do correctly.” He introduces the idea of “failing to fail, thus, learn.” While the concept of failing to fail may seem counterintuitive, it can make perfect sense in the context that so many organizations or people experience so many large-scale successes that they have forgotten or are completely oblivious to the idea of failing. Failure, even in the most insignificant fashion, seems like an incomprehensible and devastating result. This mindset is exactly what lures organizations into a perceived sense of invincibility where failure, while seemingly unlikely, is not an option. Leaders must adopt a strategy of pursuing success while simultaneously anticipating failure. They must also consider unexpected threats, such as economic downturns, disruptive innovation from competitors, the exodus of a key player, a shift in customer preferences or catastrophic systemic failure. This will help leaders strategize methods of evasion while maintaining focus on steps to realize success. Otherwise, a blind pursuit of success will eventually not only result in failure, but will result in the failure to effectively respond to failure.

Conversely, another common pitfall of organizations is the idea of failing to analyze successes as if they were failures. Some organizations may go to the extreme in their analysis of failure, all the while neglecting the analysis of their successes. Consider the following ideal: success is the result of hard work, good planning and a winning strategy that is aligned with operations. It is that simple, right?

Wrong. Ignorantly viewing successes through overly optimistic glasses can lead to blindness of why a success actually occurred. Leaders tend to think that success happened as a result of their keen skills or those of their teams. In reality, successes can occur through various means, such as good fortune, luck or the failure of a competitor (Gino & Pisano, 2011). Grouping truly earned success and accidental success together causes leadership to become ignorant to the cause of the two similar results acquired through vastly different means.

Success is good no matter how you look at it. Success is also something to which all organizations and individuals aspire. It should be pursued and maintained at almost any cost or sacrifice. However, for success to be
One way that organizations fail in safety is by failing to properly manage their newly hired safety professionals. Continuous and not a short-term, one-time event, it must be analyzed with appropriate adjustments in strategies to ensure its longevity. “Nothing succeeds for long without considerable effort and constant vigilance” (Kanter, 2011). A culture that promotes the analysis of success will benefit by determining exactly why things went well. Analyzing successes can not only help replicate that particular strategy, but it can help distinguish success’s root cause. Is it because of a competitor’s failure, a stroke of good luck or an outstanding strategy?

Failure, in many cases, comes in the form of accidents, incidents, near misses and damage to property. One common theme that safety professionals encounter are minor accidents that are unreported until they can no longer be hidden. Others are simply underreported, and the true severity of the accident is withheld or concealed. Reasons for this may be out of fear of retribution, the need to conceal a personal or physical weakness or an honest attempt to protect the company from costly or seemingly unnecessary medical-related expenses. The result of these incidents represents a breakdown in the system of reporting and treatment. Consequently, minor accidents turn into major expenses because of the failure to report them, which also makes higher indirect costs (e.g. replacement, rework, rehire, loss time). A common fact in the world of safety is that the indirect costs of an injury can far exceed the direct costs because of their prolonged effect, depth and breadth of influence.

Employees fail to work safely in a variety of ways and for many reasons. They fail to follow safety guidelines, take shortcuts, execute tasks in a hurry, forget to wear PPE, do not ask for assistance when in doubt or act as they have been trained to do. One way to take failures in safety to the extreme and to exacerbate an already unfortunate circumstance is to underreport or not report an accident or incident.

For example, reporting accidents, incidents and near misses can benefit the entire organization in many ways: 1) it provides a means by which other facilities may avoid a future recurrence; 2) it helps everyone understand if a procedure is not working; 3) it exposes weaknesses in the system, equipment or training; 4) it aids in early detection of future costly medical expenses; and 5) it is a feedback medium by which we can gauge the trust and confidence we have with our employees. The simple act of reporting an injury can help effectively minimize an already failed attempt to operate safely. An effective safety-specific goal would be to communicate to employees that failure in the form of not reporting accidents is unacceptable and that the anticipation of failure and learning from failure are as critical, if not more critical, than learning from our successes.

Avoiding Safety Failure

The safety profession is still a new and misunderstood concept in the typical organizational model. One way that organizations fail in safety is by failing to properly manage their newly hired safety professionals. Have you ever worked for a place where you were the first safety professional? Or where a dedicated safety professional has been absent or severely ineffective for a long time? Or where previous safety people have failed at communicating their needs?

These are common scenarios in which SH&E professionals find themselves at one point or another throughout their careers. When compared to other functions of an organization, safety had little to no identity up until the latter part of the 20th century. Given the field’s infancy, failure is bound to occur during this period where safety professionals must train their organizations to consider “safety” a key to sustainability. Just as companies and industries must train their safety people to interact accordingly, safety professionals must train their organizations to operate under the guidance of their safety professionals so they can become an integral part of the organization.

Safety and health professionals who must constantly guide their organizations toward legal compliance may seem unrealistic, overbearing and demanding, but many organizations do not know how to manage safety professionals. They are unfamiliar with industry standards and how to interpret them because safety has not been a priority or a dedicated safety professional has never been readily available. Some are unsure how to bridge operations with safety and offer little to no guidance on how to do so. Others are oblivious to the ongoing needs for safety training, industry and legal updates, financial requirements to gain and maintain compliance, the return on investment that safety provides the entire organization and efforts necessary to maintain an effective health and safety program. These concepts may seem obvious at all levels of a typical company, however, in some places, safety is still a new and unexplored frontier where SH&E professionals must train and prepare their organizations to avoid safety failure.
How do SH&E professionals fail? The following is a nonexhaustive but typical list of five common examples of how SH&E professionals fail and what can be done to do recover successfully.

1) Overextending. SH&E professionals must realize that sometimes a safety initiative can take weeks, months or years to take effect. Taking on too much at once can be catastrophic because nothing happens overnight, and the larger the organization, the more time it may need to gain momentum. How much safety exposure the organization has can dictate its timeliness in complying with the safety professional’s recommendations. Organizations are complex with multiple departments, geographic areas and subcultures. Many things are out of our control, and we must act accordingly. By taking on too much at once and overextending, we run the risk of trying to achieve much and accomplishing nothing. Most in upper management would prefer that we find balance in what we attempt and acquire just a few small wins. This is progress. Building on small quick wins can set a standard of success over which we can press forward with medium, large and extra-large wins in the future.

2) Aiming too high and expecting perfection. Hoping that employees will instantly comply with every regulation resulting in zero accidents or incidents is setting oneself up for failure. Excellence can be achieved through hard work and sound principles, but “zero anything” will result in “hidden everything.” Expecting that, in the beginning of a new initiative, some accidents and incidents will occur is a healthy and realistic way to approach safety, accurately measure the safety program’s effectiveness and coach and mentor those needing improvement. Legal compliance, from all levels of the organization, as well as safe work habits from workers, can take time. Longstanding habits are difficult to change quickly.

3) Abandoning, hiding or forgetting previous failures. Can you afford to fail and learn nothing from the experience? Everyone will eventually have programs and goals that go unmet and underaccomplished. Failed attempts must be remembered and leveraged appropriately because there is great value in failure. Failure in safety can be a costly experience on all levels, so think of failure as one of the best learning tools available. Learning from others’ failures is valuable so as to not commit the same failure, but learning from your own failures can be priceless. Analyze and revisit each failure as if its reinsertion may be appropriate or necessary at a later date because what did not work then might work later. Otherwise, failures truly are failures and nothing more if they are simply abandoned and forgotten.

4) Losing safety champions. Some SH&E professionals, especially when newly hired, find themselves fighting an uphill battle in gathering safety champions. Safety champions are those who are not internal SH&E professionals but are big supporters of your causes. They want to see you succeed and will stand up for safety. Ask people from other departments about previous safety program items and about the previous safety professional. There is nothing wrong with asking others about your predecessor’s performance or personality. A confident and professional approach will draw honest information from people who will help you avoid a similar approach and will adjust your strategy.

However, many safety professionals fall into “safety authority,” which draws a defensive response from others. By approaching safety initiatives through a cooperative and collaborative effort, we can win people over and depend on them for future support. When a safety enemy has been made or resistance is perceived, we can withdraw and let the issue rest. A knee-jerk reaction from a resistor is a valuable sign that can help avert future encounters with other people of similar demeanor.

5) Not positioning safety in the organization with vision. The SH&E professional’s background and reason for studying, applying and practicing safety will dictate how passionately s/he positions safety. Safety must have meaning, not just for the SH&E professional, but for everyone it serves. For upper management, safety must be positioned as a function that serves the entire organization on a financial and competitive level. By applying safety principles to operations and sales, revenue will increase and will shed a positive light on safety by helping win the support of top decision-makers. Safety can cooperate with other functions thus creating more value to involved parties. If a dollar figure can be assigned to safety, others will benefit as well, which allows safety to be accepted by others on a macro level. Using vision to position safety as a key player to all will strengthen its influence.

**Failure Response**

How does an organization respond to failure? A carefully calculated navigation of a particular failure is necessary and with that a series of critical steps and questions must be considered. First, leadership must set the example that some forms of failure are acceptable to discuss and will not lead to personal or departmental reprimand. People who have failed at anything in the workplace most likely feel remorse, embarrassment,
shame and guilt, and would do anything in their power to reverse whatever damage may have been done. Think of a time that you failed at work by making the most trivial mistake. Forgetting to follow up with someone, underpreparing for a meeting or issuing a message that is misinterpreted or undervalued are examples of failures.

These failures are easily corrected, but leadership’s role in that corrective action can be pivotal in promoting the future correction of their own as well as others’ failures. The forgiving and promotion of failure acceptance and correction require that leaders take an introspective approach. They must look at themselves to set a standard that others can follow, which begins by taking personal responsibility and owning up to their own failures. Leaders who are secure enough to address their organization’s failures as well as their own will be surprised by the confidence they can win from their followers. This confidence won by others can foster an environment rich in interpersonal tolerance, which can help everyone accept failure as a method of future, and potentially permanent, improvement.

Few employees are happy to follow a leader who operates in denial of his/her own failures or who punishes, ignores or rebukes the failures of others. Long is the list of failures that employees may compile about their leaders and their work habits. However, short is the list of failures that leaders actually own up to and discuss. Leaders can be more effective by realizing that employees who come in confidence to admit or discuss their own failures can help leaders lead. Employees usually have a hard time dealing with their own failures, especially those employees who consistently exhibit excellence. They may be seeking forgiveness, development and mentoring to help to avoid a repeat and may seek their leader’s empathy by offering ways they have personally learned from failure.

Leaders must act appropriately by taking this rare opportunity to win an employee’s confidence by helping transform failure into long-term success. Not only may one employee be inspired by such an unconventional encounter, but his/her coworkers may also be motivated in the same way to make failure a learning opportunity, not an event to be forgotten.

In conclusion, by realizing the value in failure, we are almost as likely to benefit from it as we are from success granted that we: 1) accept failure, 2) identify the causes and 3) execute an effective analysis of it. Failure can carry with it a not-so-obvious face of success.

NASA has long been a target for lessons in the why, how and what of failure in management, technology and organizational behavior. The Apollo program, famed for its successes of virtually every kind, was plagued with early failures in the form of delays, property damage, technological failure and loss of life—on the launch pad. Look at the events around the Apollo 13 space mission. While this mission was a complete failure in its attempt to execute a moon landing, it returned three astronauts to earth safely. This particular mission will forever be known in the space community as “the successful failure.” Furthermore, attempting to fail intentionally solely for educational purposes or to prove a point is ill-advised. Anticipating failure, foreseeing its potential long-term impact and preparing for a full recovery and future prevention are highly recommended. Also, performance under pressure—the ability to maintain composure, learn, adapt and persevere—is what separates the winners from the losers (Kanter, 2011).

**REFERENCES**


Cameron Clark works as a safety engineer at EchoStar Broadcasting Corp. in Cheyenne, WY. He has approximately 10 years’ safety/construction experience and holds many industry-recognized certifications as well as a master’s degree in organizational development. Clark also has more than 10 years’ Spanish translation experience in all forms.

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