

Own It: Failure as a Springboard to Success



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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As a teenager, I was bursting with excitement when Mum and I set off to the DMV in Danvers, MA to take my driver's exam. A year prior, my older sister returned home from her exam with a newly laminated driver's license in hand. And we all laughed when Dad told us she had backed onto a sidewalk when asked to complete the final step in the exam: parking the car at the DMV.

My experience learning to drive with Mum was fun. There were many laughs among the lessons, but no anger or tears. She was encouraging and gentle and never got annoyed when I stalled while learning to shift gears. The tears eventually came the day I left the DMV without my license. I had failed to anticipate—and practice—using hand signals while driving the manual transmission VW. For days, years, and decades, Mum and I attributed my failure to a mythical quota (“maybe he had to fail at least one person per day?”) or the examiner's evil nature. Now I can see how overconfidence and my narrow focus on shifting gears smoothly blinded me to the many skills required to ace the road test.

Getting it Wrong to Get it Right

In his book *Chasing Failure*, motivational speaker Ryan Leak writes that “Sometimes we discover what we're supposed to do by process of elimination.” He encourages us to return to “why” we are doing or striving for something in the moment we fail. Leak writes, “...my why sustains me when my doubts are noisy. If your why is compelling, you'll be willing to get it wrong a few times to get it right.”

When was your last failure or misstep in a risk role? Perhaps your last executive team or board risk briefing fell flat, or you were defensive when your CEO or a board member asked a perfectly appropriate question. Or the feedback from your last risk committee meeting signaled frustration with the ambiguous agenda. Or during a workshop, your team vetoed your creative approach to ranking and prioritizing risk, instead voting to guess each risk's likelihood and impact and rank them that way.

Use Question Prompts to Leverage Learning

To leverage learning when we stumble, ponder these questions:

- What assumptions did I make? What was the impact of the assumptions I got wrong?

- Whose point of view should I have understood before proceeding? What excuse held me back from seeking that perspective?
- What was the most surprising aspect of how things turned out? In what ways could I have anticipated that outcome? What were the hints of what was to come? What role did overconfidence play?
- What were the various outcomes I anticipated from the start? Did I focus too quickly on a single trajectory or outcome?
- What is the hardest lesson worth learning from this stumble? How will I remind myself not to over-simplify this valuable lesson? What will I do to fully understand and apply this lesson?
- If I were given a do-over opportunity, what is the first thing I would do?
- How will I describe this failure in a way that reflects humility, not hubris?

Today, when I look back on the humbling moment when I failed my first driver's test, I'm reminded of the double whammy of overconfidence and narrow focus. I'm reminded to lean into what I don't know, what I can't possibly know, and think far and wide about possible scenarios, outcomes, and the lessons that will be available, regardless of the outcome.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is the executive director of NRMC. She welcomes your emails and calls about how you're turning humbling failures into powerful learning opportunities, at 703-777-3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.