

RYP Quarterly

Fail Forward: It's the Only Way to Grow

By David Stewart



RYP QUARTERLY

Failure. It's a word that makes most leaders uncomfortable. Yet the truth is, no innovation, growth, or meaningful change has ever happened without it. The most successful leaders aren't those who avoid failure, but those who learn to fail forward, to turn mistakes into momentum, setbacks into stepping stones, and doubt into determination. In a world that rewards perfection and punishes error, learning to fail forward is one of the most important, and most underdeveloped, leadership qualities.

What Does "Failing Forward" Really Mean?

To "fail forward" means to **use failure as fuel for progress**. It's about learning from every misstep and applying those lessons to future decisions. Instead of being paralysed by mistakes, failing forward means moving through them, faster, wiser, and stronger. The concept was popularised by author John C. Maxwell, who wrote that the difference between average people and achieving people is their perception and response to failure. Failing forward is not about celebrating failure for its own sake; it's about **extracting growth from the experience**. It's the opposite of avoidance. It means acting, accepting that not everything will work, and treating feedback (even painful feedback) as a gift, to improve.

Why Failing Forward Matters For Leaders

In leadership, it's not about being perfect, it's about being purposeful. How a leader responds to mistakes sets the tone for everyone else. When leaders model failing forward, they:

Build trust and authenticity by admitting when something didn't work makes you relatable and real. People respect honesty more than image.

Encourage innovation. Teams that fear failure play small. Teams that feel safe to experiment are more creative and adaptable.

Develop resilience. Every setback is an opportunity to strengthen resilience and self-belief. Create a learning culture. Failing forward turns "Who stuffed up?" into "What can we learn?"

Those who fail forward don't see failure as final; they see it as feedback.

When a leader responds to failure with structured critical reflection led by curiosity, instead of criticism, it changes the whole environment. Staff stop hiding mistakes and start learning from them. That's how progress happens.

History Is Littered With Leaders Who Failed Forward

- **Thomas Edison** made over 10,000 attempts before inventing a working light bulb. He famously said, "I didn't fail, I found 10,000 ways that didn't work."
- **James Dyson** went through 5,126 failed prototypes over 15 years while developing his new vacuum. He has been quoted as saying "Failure is so much more interesting because you learn from it. Success is made from 99% failure."
- **Walt Disney** was once fired for "lacking imagination." His early ventures went broke. Yet he persisted, building one of the most creative companies in history. He often told his staff "It's always trial and error. Try new ideas. Search for something better."
- **Colonel Sanders** had his unique fried chicken recipe rejected over 1,000 times before he founded what is now called KFC at the age of 62. "One has to remember to treat failure as a stepping stone to something better."

These leaders succeeded because they learned from their setbacks and refused to let failure define them. They didn't fall backward into blame; they failed forward into growth. They had the Courage to Try Again

Some Practical Ways to Fail Forward

Failing forward isn't just a catch phrase, it's a skill that must be practised to be acquired. Here are five ways to apply it in leadership, business, and life:

1. Redefine failure: Stop seeing failure as the end of the story. It's simply information. Ask:

- What did this experience teach me?
- What can I do differently next time?

By reframing failure as feedback, you turn frustration into insight.

2. Create Psychological Safety: For teams to fail forward, they need to feel safe enough to speak up.

The leader encourages open conversations about what worked and what didn't. Key is to role model frank and respectful feedback, whilst recognising initiative, even when results fall short.

Teams that admit mistakes outperform those that hide or deny them.

3. Reflect and debrief: After any major effort, a harvest, a big project, a new system implementation, take time to reflect and debrief. Explore:

- What went well?
- What didn't?
- What is one learning or improvement we could adapt next time?

These simple reviews build a culture of continuous learning.

4. Share your own failures: As a leader, your willingness to admit your own missteps gives others permission to be open about theirs. When you say, "I got that wrong, but here's what I learned," you model growth and vulnerability which always builds a leader's credibility.

Leaders are never perfect or know everything. Stories of how you recovered after a setback speaks volumes for your leadership credibility

5. Encourage calculated risk: Progress requires experimentation. Allow your team to test small ideas before scaling them up. Celebrate effort and learning, not just outcomes.

Remember, people who never fail are usually people who never try.

The Man in The Arena Vs The Critic In the Stand

The World is full of armchair critics, keyboard warriors, or those ready to pass on quick judgements on why something will or has failed. The people who should be admired are those bold enough to try. Those willing to put themselves out there, have a go, and when setbacks occur, dust themselves off, reflect, and try again.

As Al Pacino famously said ***“Never listen to anybody who has done nothing”***. The below speech was delivered by Theodore Roosevelt over 100 years ago, to the exact same genre of people who are quick to criticise but never put themselves out there to try anything! It is just as relevant today.



The Man in the Arena

Over a century ago, U.S. President **Theodore Roosevelt** captured the idea of failing forward perfectly in his famous 1910 speech “The Man in the Arena.” He reminded us that credit belongs not to “the critic who points out how the strong man stumbles,” but to “the man who is actually in the arena, trying, putting themselves out there. His speech was highlighting the character of people who are quick to criticise others yet never do anything themselves.

Roosevelt’s message still rings true for every leader today, especially where criticism is easy, and courage is visible. It is always easier to sit back in judgement, rather than to have the courage to try.

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

-Theodore Roosevelt April 23, 1910, Sorbonne Paris

Fail Forward in Action: The Leadership Lens

Key is to turn failure into a fuel. When you fail forward, every mistake becomes a stepping stone. It’s a process of refining, not defining, who you are as a leader. The key is to respond to failure with reflection, not rejection. Ask yourself:

- What did this teach me about myself, my team, or my customers?
- How can I use this lesson to get better?
- What will I do differently next time?

Those who ask these questions consistently build momentum. they become learners, not victims of circumstance.

Leading by Turning Failure into Fuel: *Adopt a Pause, Reflect, Plan, React Mindset*

Leaders who fail forward don't seek perfection; they seek progress. They understand that the only real failure is the one we don't learn from. The next time something doesn't go to plan, pause before you panic. Reflect before you react. Ask what the experience taught you, and how it can make you stronger. Leadership isn't about avoiding failure; it's about responding to it with humility, resilience, and growth. When you lead with this mindset, your team will follow your example. Because in the end, success doesn't come from never falling, it comes from getting up, learning fast, and moving forward.

In leadership, in business, and in life, failing forward isn't optional — it's essential.

Just Have One More Try, It's Dead Easy to Die, It's Living That's Hard

This is a 1913 quote Douglas Mawson said to himself as he was hanging for his life in a crevasse in the Antarctic, with no person there to help. It is the final line in a poem written during World War 1 by Robert W Service (red Cross War Poet) in 1916.

THE QUITTER

BY Robert W Service (Red Cross War Poet 1916)

When you're lost in the Wild, and you're scared as a child,
And Death looks you bang in the eye,
And you're sore as a boil, it's according to Hoyle
To cock your revolver and . . . die.
But the Code of a Man says: "Fight all you can,"
And self-dissolution is barred.
In hunger and woe, oh, it's easy to blow . . .
It's the hell-served-for-breakfast that's hard.

"You're sick of the game!" Well, now, that's a shame.
You're young and you're brave and you're bright.
"You've had a raw deal!" I know — but don't squeal,
Buck up, do your damndest, and fight.
It's the plugging away that will win you the day,
So don't be a piker, old pard!
Just draw on your grit; it's so easy to quit:
It's the keeping-your-chin-up that's hard.

It's easy to cry that you're beaten — and die;
It's easy to crawfish and crawl;
But to fight and to fight when hope's out of sight —
Why, that's the best game of them all!
And though you come out of each gruelling bout,
All broken and beaten and scarred,
Just have one more try — it's dead easy to die,
It's the keeping-on-living that's hard.

A Final Thought

Leadership today demands adaptability, courage, and humility. It's not about never falling; it's about how fast you get up, what you learn on the way, and how you bring others with you. Failing forward doesn't mean lowering your standards or being careless, it means **leaning into the messy, unpredictable process of growth**. It's a mindset that separates resilient leaders from reactive ones, and innovators from imitators.

Leadership Lesson:

The leaders who shape the future won't be those who avoided failure, they'll be those who built wisdom, empathy, and credibility through it. So, the next time something doesn't go as planned,

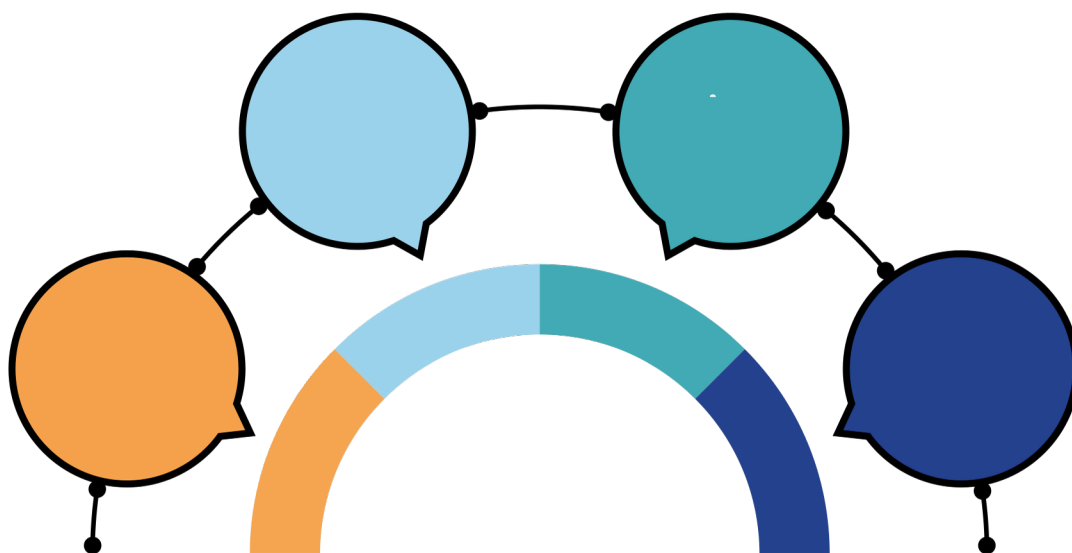
Pause before you Panic.

Reflect before you React.

Learn before you Move on.

In leadership and in life, the path to success is rarely straight, but if you fail forward, it always moves you ahead.

Facta Non-Verba – Deeds Not Words



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