Activity: Sharing & Celebrating Failings
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"Mistakes are always forgivable, if one has the courage to admit them." – Bruce Lee

Failure & Forgiving: Failing Forward

Resilience and perseverance both rely on being able to recover after disturbance or failure and try again. Failed attempts can be reframed as 'prototypes,' in an entrepreneurial attitude. Most entrepreneurs, who invent something unseen before in the world, fail many times before achieving a desirable outcome. John Maxwell (see references) calls this 'failing forward'.   This attitude toward failure allows greater freedom to experiment, and to take more risks with unbounded creativity. Some groups celebrate their failures as noble attempts that, while ultimately unsuccessful, nonetheless contributed toward the group's aims.

Any kind of transition to new ways of living and working will probably be a similar process, with plenty of uncertainty and very few patterns or role models as guides. In times of uncertainty and disturbance, failures may be quite common. An inner transition will ideally reframe failure as something likely to happen, part of being human, and no big problem. Transitioners will likely benefit from cultivating compassion and expressing empathy for failure, setback, and adversity.

Increasing empathy and compassion for someone (including yourself) who fails when attempting something new can boost self-respect and help them to try again. Over-criticising failure (including harsh self-criticism) can be a path away from resilience toward despair. Harsh criticism is not the same as constructive feedback, an important process for accountability, respecting boundaries, and well-being (see Offering and Receiving Feedback).

Cultivating compassion will ideally lead to forgiving each other easily for failures or shortcomings. Forgiving is an important process that begins with empathy and compassion, developing from the attitude that everyone is imperfectly human, trying their best, and may fail in similar ways. Forgiveness is related to a number of beliefs about self, others, blame, and failure. Forgiveness often involves expressing emotions, rather than suppressing them (see Guide to Emotions). Rather than holding onto a grudge or a limiting belief about oneself or another, forgiving can involve releasing stuck energy and allowing it to flow.

Like empathy, forgiveness is a skill that can be improved with practice. Beginners may find it easier to start with forgiving something small, which can be very easy, and take a short time. Forgiving something large can be more difficult and take longer. It may be easier for some people to forgive others than to forgive themselves, or vice versa. An inner transition will ideally lead to a greater willingness and capability to forgive both self and others.

Vulnerability (building trust)

Vulnerability is another part of the shared common human condition.   All humans experience times of feeling fragile, powerless, or in need of support. It can take a lot of courage to trust someone enough to show vulnerability. Paradoxically, practicing vulnerability can be part of an inner transition toward emotional maturity, becoming stronger rather than weaker.

Shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown sees vulnerability as a path to joy, love, and trust; to finding the way back to connection with each other. Brown describes connection as the energy that is created between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment. Connection depends on allowing oneself to be vulnerably seen.

Courageously sharing vulnerability is one way to build trust between people, which in turn relies on strengthening the 'muscles' of empathy and compassion. This can be like building a bridge – a slender path spanning a divide, creating connection instead of separation. At first, such bridges may be fragile; they can grow stronger over time. Vulnerability can take practice, especially for those from a background where it was not encouraged.

Empathy allows individuals to relate to others' vulnerability. If someone who is feeling vulnerable seeks your support, it can be helpful to notice your reactions and responses. Pause and notice your immediate physical, mental, or emotional reactions. If you can not feel anything, try being curious about that.

Celebrating Failure

By introducing new aspects to their group culture, some groups have begun consciously experimenting with reducing the shame commonly associated with failure. These include practices of sharing stories about failure, and re-framing failure as normal, something that can easily happen to anyone.

Groups can normalise listening to each other's stories, sharing emotions about failing, and effectively reducing shame. This can help to reduce any individual burdens of shame, or the perceived need to keep failings secret for fear of negative social consequences.

In a supportive group setting, this can develop a step further into celebrating failings.

Failure can be re-framed from something terrible, unforgivable, and secret to something unfortunate, forgivable, and common. With authenticity, compassion, and inclusive humour, individuals can learn from each other's mistakes. Stories about failures can become enjoyable comedic recountings of 'has this ever happened to you?' or 'what's the worst that could happen?'

Ideally, individuals and groups can learn to laugh about failures with each other, rather than at each other. This can reduce the exclusion felt by laughing at the expense of others. In a group culture where failures are normalised and celebrated, stories about failings can even become highly prized. Some groups have developed near-competitions for who can tell the 'best' story about their 'worst' failure, the 'fail of the day'! Such practices support a group's inner transition away from a culture of shame toward a culture of empathy and mutual support (see Empathy & Compassion).

Oops & Ouch

Some groups experimenting with their group culture use the Dutch expression 'oops' as a shorthand to mean several things. For example: "I understand that my action or behaviour may have affected you negatively. Please forgive me. I did not intend any harm or offense." Ideally, an 'oops' can help individuals communicate recognition of a failure that may have affected someone else. The single word 'oops' can convey much, especially when someone is feeling genuine regret for their failure, and having difficulty expressing themselves. It can be part of transitioning toward a culture of empathy.

An 'oops' can also be mis-used, as an inauthentic or sarcastic expression which conveys the opposite message. For example: "I intend for my action or behaviour to affect you negatively. I have done this purposely in a way that will be difficult for you to remedy or undo. In this context, I have more power than you. Remember that I can use it to cause you even more harm in the future." This kind of 'oops' is based on a worldview of separation, individualism, and competition, reinforcing shame. Used in this way, an 'oops' can twist from helping to harming.

Some groups experimenting with their group culture use the expression 'ouch' as a shorthand to mean several things. For example: "Your action or behaviour has affected me negatively. Please be aware of this. I would like to have a longer discussion about it sometime. While you may not have intended any harm or offense, I would prefer your behaviour to change." Ideally, an 'ouch' can help individuals communicate that a behaviour may have been perceived as a failure that has affected someone else, and may need addressing. The single word 'ouch' can convey much, especially when someone may not be aware of the impacts of their behaviour, or if someone is having difficulty expressing themselves. Partnered with 'oops,' it can also be part of transitioning toward a culture of empathy. A brief initial interaction -- one person saying "ouch," and another replying "oops" -- can lead to a longer discussion later at a mutually convenient time.

Introducing and using 'oops' and 'ouch' can be useful as part of creating simple and easy to use language and agreements for conflict resilience and feedback culture.

> "How do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?"
> – bell hooks

Activities

Honesty Box

With your group, put a small box in the corner. Give the box a lid or a slot. Give everyone some scraps of paper and writing utensils. Take 15-20 minutes as a group to write on scraps of paper short descriptions of anything anyone is ashamed about, or has been told to feel shame about in the past. Write legibly, and do not sign your paper. Fold your paper so it is even more anonymous, and place it in the box. You can write as many as you like.

Once everyone has finished writing, or time is up, everyone listens while the descriptions are read aloud. One person can read them all, or the box can circulate and several people can read one.

Reflect on this activity. How did you feel before? After? How does your shame compare to others'?

4 Prompts: Sharing About Failures

With a partner, make an agreement of confidentiality, not to repeat anything shared during this activity. Take it in turns so you both speak about each prompt.   Keep time so one person has 3-5 minutes to speak about a prompt, while the other listens without responding. Then swap roles, so the other person can speak about the same prompt. Thank each other.

Prompt 1 Mild:
Describe a time when you felt mildly embarrassed about something you did. Not your most difficult time, a time when you recovered pretty easily.

Prompt 2 Small:
Describe a time when you made a small mistake. Not your biggest mistake, one that helped you learn something. How did you feel about it? What were some consequences?

Prompt 3 Rupture:
Describe a time when something you did hurt the feelings of someone you care about. How long did it take for you to notice? How long did it take for them to recover?

Prompt 4 Repair:
Describe a time when someone forgave you. What had you done? Were you worried? Was the forgiveness easy for them to give? For you to receive? What did you both do to support the repair?

Option: As a group, mingle and speak about each prompt in sequence.

Recovering from Failure

In pairs, share a story about a time you failed. How did you know you failed? How much time went by before you knew? Who did your failure affect? Was it easy or difficult to recover? Why? Did you learn anything you might recommend to someone else? Make a list of top tips or things to avoid.

In pairs, discuss: who in the past role-modeled for you what recovering or learning from failure looks like? How did this affect how you feel about failure, in yourself and in others? When you fail now, what adjustments might you make? Make a list of what you'd do the same, do differently, or do more.

Discussion Questions

As a whole group discuss:

In your experience, what has failure looked like? After reviewing this guide, how do you now think about failure?

Why would someone not recover or learn from failure? Make a list of obstacles, taboos, disincentives, social stigmas, or other barriers to recovering from failure. Has it been hard for you to recover or learn from failure? Why or why not?

How easily do the individuals in your group recover or learn from failure? How do you know? How easy is it for someone in your group to admit to their failure?

How easily does your group as a whole recover or learn from failure? What are some ways of recovering or learning from failure your group has or would like to have? What are some ways other groups like yours do this well? How might reframing failure help your group to collaborate better?

References

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