Have You Learnt How To Fail Forward? The Lesson We Can't Learn Soon Enough

As I scanned the morning headlines in my newsfeed this week, one stood out:

**Why this school wants kids to fail.**

The idea of teaching kids to fail may seem pretty absurd. Particularly a private school, where the tuition requires parents to dig deep in their hip pocket in the hope it will pay off in future success.

Yet that’s exactly what the private school featured in the article did when it kicked off its first ‘Failure Week,’ which involved teachers sharing stories of personal failure with students.

- kids are becoming so preoccupied with perfectionism that they're missing out on the deep learning that accompanies failure.
- we must teach our children that the best lessons in life don’t come from winning the game, but from learning how to play it.
While dedicating a week to celebrating failure may sound novel, their initiative reflects a growing concern among educators globally that our kids are becoming so preoccupied with perfectionism that they're missing out on the deep learning that accompanies failure.

By attempting to normalize failure as part and parcel of learning, the school is hoping to build the resilience needed to succeed. Something many young minds - particularly those who've grown up on the right side of town and have wanted for little - have yet to do. And not just in Australia.

Most parents of high schoolers in the United States and other countries know all too well the pressure children place on themselves to get the highest GPA, SAT or ACT score they possibly can. As a mother of four teenagers, I see nothing inherently wrong with my children striving for excellence and wanting...
to win in an increasingly competitive world. Yet as I wrote in a previous Courage Works column, we must teach our children that the best lessons in life don’t come from winning the game, but from learning how to play it. In the pressure cooker environment in which most high schoolers have been incubated, they too often lose perspective and fail to give themselves permission to go through the very natural and highly valuable learning process that comes from not doing every task, perfectly, every time.

As statistics on youth suicide, depression and anxiety disorders reveal an alarming decline in mental well being among our young people, building resilience has become the educational ‘buzzword’ in recent years. Resilience is not about giving up striving for success or lowering the bar to mediocrity. It’s about learning how to risk mistakes, adapt to change and bounce back from disappointment and failure as we work toward meaningful goals. And like most character strengths, it’s something that cannot be learned intellectually, but experientially.

Of course embracing the value of failure doesn’t diminish the importance of success. Success matters. A lot. But as Richard Branson shared with me, we learn far more from our failures than we ever do from our successes. Giving ourselves permission to not succeed the first time — or every time — sets us up for greater success in the longer term.

“Test scores and measures of achievement tell you where a student is, but they don’t tell you where a student could end up” wrote Carol Dweck in her book Mindset. “If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning.”
It’s not only educators and parents who have to move beyond the outdated and misguided belief that failure can be detrimental to self-esteem and future performance. Leaders must do this as well.

The lessons for the classroom apply equally in the boardroom, and at every desk in between. Providing candid feedback when someone’s failed to meet expectations creates an opportunity for self-improvement. When we explain the failure constructively, without personalizing it as a reflection of their worth or future ability, it sets the person up for success.

While few organizations may want to host their own “Failure Week,” leaders can take the principles behind it and apply them to foster innovation and create a ‘culture of courage.’ Celebrate the learning that failure provides, and make it safer for people to risk imperfect solutions to pressing problems.

They can begin by sharing their own raw and painful stories of failure and what they ultimately learned from them, just as the teachers did with students at Ivanhoe Girls’ Grammar School.

The key is to embrace the value of failing — learn how to fail fast, fail often and fail forward, leveraging each setback and misstep along the way in order to do things smarter in the future.

Surely there’s something of value in that for people of every age.

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Dr Margie Warrell is a global authority on living and leading with courage, unlocking the potential that fear holds dormant. A bestselling author of five books, Margie couples her diverse international background with grounded theories to provide actionable advice to help people make better decisions and take braver action - in work, leadership, and life. Since her childhood in rural Australia, Margie has walked her talk when it comes to living bravely, living in multiple continents and countries while raising her four children and building a global business. Founder of Global Courage, Margie sits on the board of Forbes School of Business & Technology and is trusted by global brands - NASA, Deloitte, Dell & Salesforce - to deliver transformative programs. Based in the Washington D.C. area, you can hear Margie’s insights and her conversations with global leaders & luminaries on her Live Brave Podcast. Her latest book is You’ve Got This! (Wiley 2020) More information:
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