

# The Paradox of Success and Failure

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On my younger son's first day of school, he took it upon himself to share with his teacher that his mom's favorite word had 4-letters and started with the letter F. His teacher was appalled. The moment I arrived to pick him up, she was in my face clearly articulating her disapproval of my parenting skills. I immediately felt like I was right back in grade school getting scolded. I could feel every inch of my body heating up and turning bright red. My mouth instantly dried up like the Sahara Desert and any communication skills I honed throughout the years had instantly abandoned me. I felt like I flunked as a parent and it paralyzed me in the moment. Fortunately, I had no choice but to go back to that classroom each day, lean into and get past my story of being a failure as a mother.

If I happened to be on my game that day, I would've had a clever response for that teacher. Instead of freezing up I would have confirmed my kid's statement was true yet, her interpretation was off. Fail is a great word and in my line of work (as a narrative coach), it is a favorite. But, I wasn't that quick-witted, so instead of recovering in the moment, I'm sharing my experience now with you.

I really do like the word fail. I don't like how it feels or the immediate impact it has but for what it has the potential to provide in its wake. The challenge is as humans we tend to focus on the immediate pain of failure rather than the possible long-term gain limiting the potential of what could actually be achieved. When we are in this space, we become hyper-focused on avoiding failure or more so avoiding being judged because of our failure that we hold back going "all in". As a result, we merely scratch the surface of our capacity.

The paradox of success is failure. While it seems contradictory to lean into failure if we are trying to experience success, the reality is that we will never truly experience success without failure. It is the failures that provide us understanding, perspective, ideas, solutions and more that we didn't even think of until we botched things up. The new insights multiply our chances of success. Also, when we achieve success without failure we tend to feel like an imposter or a fraud fearing at any minute we will be found out. Confidence and belief in self are not a result of success they are the result of facing and embracing our failures.

One of my favorite failure to success stories is the making of the movie Jaws. It was Stephen Spielberg's first movie for a major studio. He had spent his entire budget on one prop and the longer "it" lingered in the water, the more it resembled the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man than a terrifying man-eating shark. Spielberg's dream of being recognized as a gifted movie director

was literally drowning right in front of him. He was at a choice point. He could approach the situation like many others would trying to salvage his main character and surely limiting his career forever. Or, he could take his failure and find how it was going to be his success. In the end, his greatest problem became his greatest teacher. If the shark wasn't going to cooperate, then he needed a different tool to engage the audience. His solution-use the audience. In the end, he leaned on people's imagination of what might be in the water than actually showing what was in the water. Jaws doesn't even appear until eighty-one minutes into the movie, but people were squirming in their seats right from the beginning. According to the American Film Institute Jaws is one of the greatest movies of all times. And, it is the highest grossing film to-date.

The parenting failure I mentioned at the beginning has actually helped me improve my vocabulary. That same situation enabled me to start noticing and developing the skill to respond more effectively to criticism/feedback. A few questions I ask myself and my clients who are wanting to lean into the paradox of success and failure are:

- What are you hoping to avoid? What are you wanting to protect? What is the cost of avoiding failure?
- What will you regret if you play it safe?
- Where are you doubting your knowledge or abilities? What evidence inside of failure could reinforce your confidence or belief in self?
- What is your failure inviting you to pay attention to or learn?
- How can you use that information going forward?

Next time you find yourself trying to strive for success by avoiding failure at all costs, remember, great ideas are not born perfect. The CEO of Pixar shared in the book, Creativity Inc. that even their most successful films started out as "ugly babies." It is in the mess that the magic is born.