The Failure Files

perspectives on failure

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David Hillson

INTRODUCTION

Failure is a big topic. The word has many layers of meaning, and evokes a range of responses from different individuals and groups, depending on their background, circumstances, ambitions, hopes and fears. Some of these varying perspectives are explored in the following chapters, where experts and practitioners from various professions and industries discuss, through illustrative case studies and examples, the specific nature of failure in their area of expertise. Before we get to specifics, however, it is important to cover some introductory common ground, laying out the scope and boundaries of the topic. This should provide a conceptual framework for what follows, putting specific application areas into a wider context, and showing how the various elements of failure relate to one another.

In order to tackle this large concept, this chapter defines failure first in relation to its opposite, success. We then go on to explore some of the key characteristics of failure which might be expected to apply wherever it is encountered. As failure is not a unitary concept, some of the multiple dimensions are then outlined before suggesting some broad ways in which we might tackle failure whenever we come across it.

FAILURE AND SUCCESS

At first sight failure and success are simple opposites. To fail is not to succeed, and success is the absence of failure. But closer examination reveals a complex relationship between these two concepts and that they are not mere antonyms. Understanding how they relate together offers important insights into the nature of failure and how it should be approached. There are two important relationships to consider between failure and success. Firstly, failure starts where success ends and it defines the limits of success. But secondly, success often follows failure, since it

frequently occurs after other options have been tried and failed. These two key relationships are described below.

Failure defines limits of success

The first thing to note about failure is that it occurs at the point where we stop succeeding. In other words, we know we are no longer succeeding when we hit our first failure. This might be described as the 'Comfort Success Zone' (CSZ), which can occur in any area of activity or enterprise if we keep succeeding until we fail. This describes the situation where persistent success is bound to lead to failure. If we continue to explore the limits of our CSZ then at some point we will reach a boundary where further success is not possible, as illustrated in Figure 2-1.
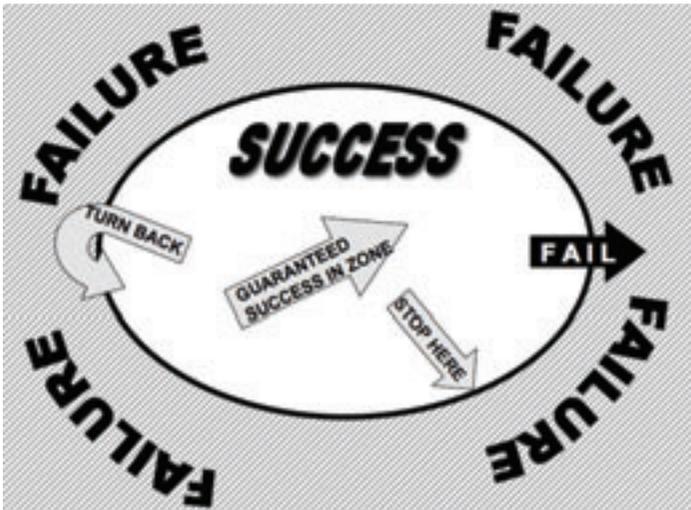
Figure 2-1: The Comfort Success Zone

When we are in a CSZ the optimal behaviour is to investigate the success zone as far as possible, to leave no opportunity unmanaged and no benefit unexploited, until we reach a failure point. The goal is to push our success to the point of failure, and not failing indicates that we are not trying hard enough. As the author T. S. Eliot said, 'Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.' Science fiction writer Sir Arthur C. Clarke remarked, 'The only way of finding the limits of the possible is by going beyond them into the impossible.' In similar vein, the winning approach of famous Formula One racing driver Mario Andretti

was embodied in his view that 'If things seem under control, you're just not going fast enough!' If we always play it safe and remain in our CSZ, then we may not experience failure, but we may also be missing out on possible areas of success that could be easily exploited.

This raises the question of what we should do if we are exploring our CSZ to the point of failure and we come to a boundary. There are of course two options. We could turn back and remain in our CSZ, where we can be confident of further continued success. Or perhaps we should accept the failure and push through it. Maybe something lies beyond the failure zone that marks the edge of the CSZ. This leads us to the second relationship between failure and success.

Success follows limits of failure

The second key insight in the relationship between failure and success is that when one stops failing then one succeeds (unless one stops altogether). This indicates another zone where failure is frequent, but which is finite and which can be traversed into a place of success. Emerging from this Failure Zone (FZ) into success brings us into a new zone where we can discover things that were previously hidden or unavailable.

Here we move beyond the failure that is experienced by others and we begin to learn new ways of succeeding and performing. This might be called the 'Innovation Success Zone' (ISZ). It can be reached by pushing through failure, being prepared to keep on failing until you eventually succeed, as illustrated in Figure 2-2.

Thomas Edison allegedly claimed to have successfully found a hundred ways not to invent the light bulb before ultimately discovering the incandescent filament, indicating the width of the FZ in this specific case before he emerged into the ISZ. While Edison may not have spoken these precise words, the sentiment was echoed by Danish physicist Niels Bohr who defined an expert as 'a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field' – in other words, someone who has explored the full extent of a particular FZ. More generally, and recognising the need to be prepared to press through the FZ in order to reach the ISZ that lies beyond, Robert Kennedy declared that 'Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly'.

In order to reach the ISZ it is necessary to push through the FZ until success is found. Not succeeding is a result of giving up too soon, losing

momentum or running out of energy. Persistence in the face of failure is rewarded eventually with success. As the British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill advised, 'If you're going through hell, keep going.'
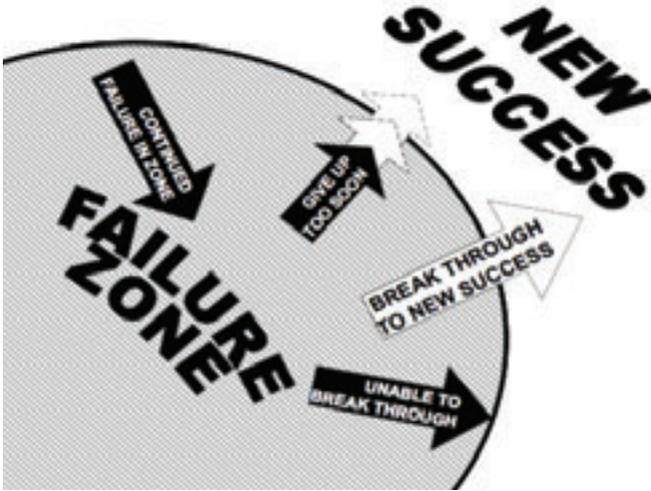
Figure 2-2: The Innovation Success Zone

Of course this is not always the case, and sometimes the FZ is infinitely thick, with no possibility of success beyond it. Or perhaps it is just impenetrable in one direction and a change of tack might lead to breakthrough. The inability to exit the FZ may be due to infeasible goals where success is just not possible or, perhaps, the result of a lack of capability or competence to make the necessary progress through the FZ into success. The famous American comedian W. C. Fields advised 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no point being a damn fool about it!' The trick is to know when to give up or change direction, and to understand the difference between a situation needing persistence and a pointless quest for unachievable success. This is well expressed in the anonymous Serenity Prayer:

> *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;*
> *The courage to change the things that I can;*
> *And the wisdom to know the difference.*

The Failure Formulae

In simplistic terms, the boundaries between failure and success discussed above can be expressed in two complementary linear formulae (where F represents Failure and S is Success):

$F = S + 1$ (step too far) (Formula 1)

$S = F + 1$ (extra attempt to succeed) (Formula 2)

Failure occurs in the Comfort Success Zone (CSZ) when one attempts to do something that is one step too far, taking you beyond the guaranteed success that is found in the CSZ (Formula 1). By contrast, success can be found in the Innovation Success Zone (ISZ) by trying one more time than the number of failures (Formula 2).

These two simple formulae appear to be contradictory and paradoxical. They cannot both be true together unless there is a more complex relationship between failure and success than simply that one is the inverse or absence of the other. Perhaps more complex formulations might reveal additional insights into the relationship between failure and success. For example:

$F = (n \times A_S) + (1 \times A_F)$ (Formula 3)

$S = (n \times A_F) + (1 \times A_S)$ (Formula 4)

In these two formulae, A_S means 'successful attempts', and A_F means 'failed attempts'. 'n' represents the number of those attempts. Formula 3 expands Formula 1, and describes the CSZ, where failure occurs if the number of trials is one failed attempt after the number of successful attempts. Similarly, Formula 4 mirrors Formula 2, with success coming if one tries one more time after all the failed attempts have occurred. The number of attempts can take any value from zero to infinity.

- In Formula 3, if n equals zero then failure is assured – even in the CSZ you cannot succeed without trying. But if n reaches infinity in Formula 3 then failure is impossible, which seems unlikely except in the most exceptional circumstances. Alternatively it may be that the goals are insufficiently challenging and one is simply trying to achieve something trivial or over-easy, and never straying close to the boundaries of the CSZ.

- In the case of Formula 4, n = 0 represents instant success. This describes success on a plate achieved at the first attempt – a rare but conceivable situation. It also reflects a transition from CSZ to ISZ with no additional effort since there is no intervening FZ. By contrast, when n = ∞ then success is impossible – no matter how many times one tries one always fails. This occurs when the goal is unachievable and defeat is inevitable, with an infinite or impenetrable FZ making the ISZ unobtainable.

BALANCING FAILURE AND SUCCESS

We have seen that in the Comfort Success Zone (CSZ), persistent success usually leads to failure. By contrast, in the Innovation Success Zone (ISZ) persistent failure usually leads to success. This describes a mutually synergistic relationship between failure and success where each leads to the other, supporting its opposite. In many ways this complex relationship between failure and success is a typical expression of the Chinese concept of balance, expressed most commonly in yin yang. This suggests that seemingly unconnected or opposing forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, giving rise to each other in turn.

Yin and yang are complementary opposites within a greater whole (expressed in the construction of the Taijitu symbol in Figure 2-3). Everything has both yin and yang aspects, although one element may manifest more strongly in particular objects or at different times. Yin and yang constantly interact, never existing in absolute stasis. Yin yang is used to describe many natural dualities, including dark and light, female and male, low and high, cold and hot. Through the changing proportions of black and white, the Taijitu symbol shows that as one aspect grows stronger the other diminishes. However the symbol also suggests that when one side is at its strongest it contains an element of the other, indicated by the contrasting dot present at the maximum of its opposite.

Figure 2-3: Taijitu symbol of yin yang

The relationship between failure and success discussed above shows clear yin yang properties, suggesting that instead of being seen as a duality perhaps they should be viewed as two sides of a single unitary phenomenon, and that we would do well to keep both aspects in view and maintain a balanced perspective. If white in the Taijitu symbol represents success and black is failure, then we see success gradually increasing to a point where it leads to failure (characterised above as the threshold between the CSZ and FZ). However we also see that failure increases until it leads to success (emerging from the FZ into the ISZ). It is also, however, usually true that when success flourishes most strongly it contains the seeds of failure, and when we are at the deepest and darkest point of failure then a glimmer of success may be detected.

THE SUCCESS-FAILURE ECOCYCLE

The interrelated yin yang aspects of failure and success can be combined with the concepts of the CSZ and ISZ (described above) to create an oscillating mode, known as the Success-Failure Ecocycle, which switches between failure and success , see Figure 2-4. (The term 'ecocycle' draws on the concept of iterative learning cycles of development from nature. It has been used in recent management literature to describe the need for repeated cycles of performance and learning.)

Here we see that fully exploring the CSZ leads one into the first Failure Zone (FZ): failure defines the limits of success. However pushing through the first FZ can lead to a new area of success, the ISZ: success follows the limits of failure. The right response on reaching the first ISZ is then to take

advantage of the innovation possibilities which it offers, exploiting our new competences and opportunities and consolidating the new insights and benefits. When we spend time in the ISZ, we become familiar and comfortable with it and it becomes our new CSZ within which we can then explore.
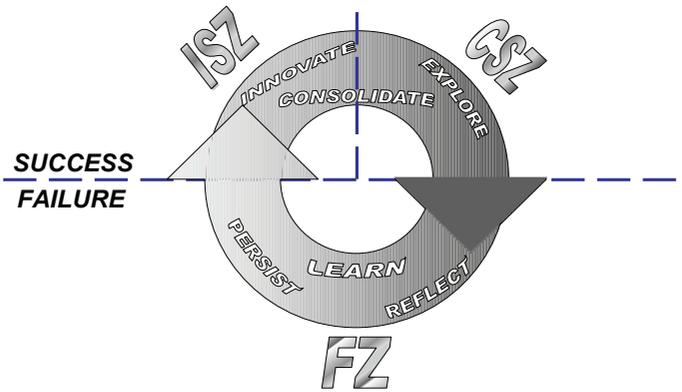
Figure 2-4: The Success-Failure Ecocycle

At this point we can create a repeating cycle, exploring our current CSZ until we reach a FZ, pushing through the FZ into an ISZ, then transforming that ISZ into a new CSZ which we can exploit until we hit a further FZ. This is the expanded Success-Failure Ecocycle shown in Figure 2-5, which is formed from repeated periods of exploration, consolidation and innovation, punctuated by times of failure.
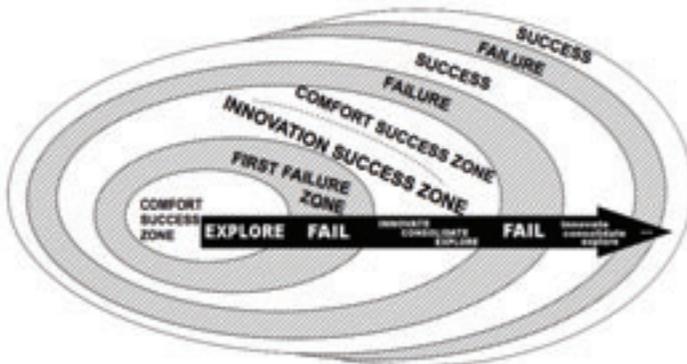
Figure 2-5: The expanded Success-Failure Ecocycle

It is important to recognise this complex relationship between failure and success, rather than simply regarding them as opposites or antonyms. The fact that we should expect continued success to lead eventually to failure will shape our behaviour, as will the understanding that in many (most?) cases we should be able to push through failure to find new success. This concept will become apparent in the chapters that follow, where specific aspects of failure are examined and we learn how they can be handled in a way that brings a degree of success.

TEN CHARACTERISTICS OF FAILURE

The development of the expanded Success-Failure Ecocycle reflecting the yin yang nature of the topic leads to one important conclusion. It is a mistake to think of failure as 'A Bad Thing'. It has a range of negative aspects alongside several positive attributes. These can be summarised into the following ten key characteristics of failure:

1. **Failure is natural.** Failure is an intrinsic part of life, as illustrated by the natural laws of competition and survival of the fittest.

2. **Failure is universal.** Failure can be found everywhere, affecting all facets of human existence, including both personal and corporate activities, in both private and business arenas.

3. **Failure is inevitable.** Perfection is an illusion, a 100% success rate is unattainable, and there will always be more failures than successes.

4. **Failure is pain**. Failure nearly always has negative consequences, and is usually unpleasant for those who experience it.

5. **Failure is opportunity.** Failure offers the chance to draw a line under the past and make a fresh start, stepping out into the future.

6. **Failure is learning.** Failure teaches us where further effort would be wasted, and encourages us not to repeat the same mistakes in the future.

7. **Failure is information.** Failure is a definite result, a clear outcome, indicating what not to do.

8. **Failure is directional.** Failure closes off some potential paths of action, and leaves others open or untried, encouraging us to try something different.

9. **Failure is stimulation.** Failure encourages the human competitive spirit to beat the odds and bounce back with renewed effort, and challenges us to step outside of our comfort zones and experiment, be creative, innovate.

10. **Failure is fun.** Accepting the possibility and likelihood of failure gives freedom to think outside the box, act unconventionally, challenge norms and stereotypes, and be different – which can be very enjoyable!

Of course not all of these characteristics are evident in every instance of failure, or they may appear at different times in the same failure. But these ten statements indicate that it is wrong to think of failure only in negative terms. There are many positive things to take from failure, including its ability to teach us lessons and stop us going in the wrong direction. Indeed the list of ten characteristics above contains more positive statements than negative, suggesting that we might have the balance wrong in the way we think about failure.

This is not to deny the negative, as there is no doubt that failure is usually not welcome, and in some cases it is downright painful – we would all prefer to succeed rather than fail. But most of the negative aspects arise more from the fear of failure than from any particular failure itself. Fear of failure can lead to an over-protective stance, preventing us from taking necessary risks or pursuing profitable opportunities 'just in case it all goes horribly wrong'. This insight leads us to an important characteristic of failure – how you respond to failure is more important than whether you fail or succeed. We will return to this before the end of this chapter.

A TYPOLOGY OF FAILURE

Having explored the complex and synergistic relationship between failure and success and outlined some of the key characteristics of failure, we can now start to consider what types of failure might exist. Initially it is tempting to try to divide failures into two main types: absolute and relative.

- *Absolute failure* is binary: one either succeeds or not, something is right or wrong, pass/fail.

- *Relative failure* describes performance which lies below some threshold: one fails to reach the desired or required standard, or fails in some important aspect or element.

This twofold division appears to be over-simplistic, however, since there are a range of possible dimensions of failure, each of which describes a different element. A particular instance might be a failure in one or more of these dimensions but a success in others. This raises the interesting question of whether a failure in one dimension means an absolute failure, or whether some dimensions are more important than others, or whether there is some negotiable balance to be struck and failure is in the eye of the beholder. Six possible dimensions of failure can be distinguished as follows:

1. **Technical failure** ('*It doesn't work*'). This describes failure to reach a required performance standard, either absolutely ('The engine won't start') or relatively ('It doesn't go fast enough').

2. **Competence failure** ('*I couldn't do it*'). This is a personal failure to achieve some desired or required goal due to lack of ability in some respect.

3. **Moral failure** ('*I cheated*'). It is possible to achieve success in a way that breaks moral or ethical standards, either personally held or societal. Moral failure can occur at individual, group or organisational levels, and might be perceived either absolutely (right and wrong) or relatively (not good enough).

4. **Parameter failure** ('*OK except late/over-budget/too slow...*'). Where there are multiple success criteria it is possible to succeed in some respects and fail in others. In some cases failure against one parameter represents overall failure, and in others it may merely be seen as an acceptable limitation or shortfall.

5. **Hierarchical failure** ('*OK for you but not for me*'). This represents the possibility that something may be perceived as a failure at one level but not at another. Hierarchical failure occurs most often in business or organisations, for example where a project is delivered on time and to budget with the full specification (a project success), but it does not deliver the expected value to the organisation (a business failure).

6. **Subjective failure** (*'I don't like it'*). Sometimes things fail for non-rational reasons, where acceptance criteria of success are subjective or intuitive or hidden or not articulated. In these cases it is possible to meet all success criteria and still be seen as a failure, although the precise reasons may not be clear.

The chapters in Part 2 of this book explore failure in different settings, and examples of each of these dimensions will be evident.

RESPONDING TO FAILURE

Although we can derive some comfort from the fact that failure is not always 'A Bad Thing' – it is not always absolute, and it has many positive characteristics – we might still want to consider how we can respond appropriately to failure. This is a major topic and can be addressed on many levels – indeed it might be a suitable topic for a subsequent book. It is, however, possible to outline one overarching strategy that can be adopted, together with three implementation strands.

The central strategy for dealing appropriately with failure is **resilience**, which needs to be present at individual, group, organisation and societal levels – wherever failure is experienced. The three proposed specific ways to implement resilience can be alliterated as the Three Ms:

- Mindset
- Minimisation
- Maximisation

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as the ability to recover quickly and completely to an original state following a perturbation. More colloquially it might be described as 'The KOKO Factor', since resilience simply requires us to 'Keep On Keeping On'. It can be exhibited by individuals, groups and organisations of various sorts, and at societal level:

- *Individual resilience* has a number of synonyms, including determination, persistence, courage, grit, stickability and bounce-back-ability. It is essentially a blend of inherent personal character, practised emotional literacy and the exercise of will that enables a person to pick themselves up and carry on following

unwelcome or difficult circumstances. Resilient individuals are able to take in their stride what life throws at them and carry on towards their goal, although, perhaps, carrying a limp as they bear the consequences of adversity.

- *Group and organisational resilience* is an aspect of shared corporate culture combined with robust processes and grounded values that allows the group to absorb the impact of unforeseen changes or external shocks. It is most evident in the corporate approach to business continuity or disaster recovery, which is targeted, tailored and tried in resilient organisations.

- *Societal resilience* is demonstrated by cultures and societies with a strong sense of identity and shared values as well as internal coherence among and between members of that society across its various strata. When faced with external challenges to its identity or values a resilient society is able to assert those elements that lie at its fundamental core, allowing it to stand firm in the face of threats and maintain its essential existence.

These three layers are hierarchical and nested, with complex interactions and interdependencies, since society consists of various groups, organisations and individuals, and each group or organisation contains other groups as well as individuals. If we could improve our understanding of how these levels of resilience relate together and interact, it would help us to develop enhanced resilience wherever it is needed, for individuals, groups and society.

Much has been written elsewhere about the need for resilience and how to develop it, and it is not necessary to repeat it here. (A helpful starter can be found at www.TestYourRQ.com which introduces the idea of a Resilience Quotient based on research carried out by Jane Clarke and John Nicholson.) Specific examples of the application of resilience in the face of different types of failure are evident in the chapters in Part 2 of this book, as various authors describe how the challenges of failure can be tackled and overcome. Those who survive the challenges of failure are not necessarily the strongest, cleverest, most talented or gifted individuals or groups. Instead they are the ones who know that '90% of success is turning up', and they are prepared to keep going.

There are however three generic implementation themes that can be identified as useful options for developing and deploying resilience in the face of failure. These are briefly outlined below using the Three Ms:

- adopting an appropriate **mindset towards failure**
- taking proactive steps to **minimise the occurrence of failure**
- being sure to **maximise the value obtained** from those failures that do occur

Mindset towards failure
We've seen that failure is inevitable and natural, and it should be expected in any human enterprise that is worth undertaking. We've also seen that failure has a synergistic relationship with success, and the two are inextricably linked. Finally we've learned that failure has many positive characteristics. Consequently our response to failure should be to expect and accept it. If and when we fail, it is entirely normal and acceptable.

It is more important for us to know how to act in the presence of failure. Here we need to know whether to persist or not. When we encounter a Failure Zone, should we press through looking for the next success, or are we trying to do something unachievable? Knowing when to quit is a key element of an appropriate response to failure. Unfortunately this is not usually a black-and-white matter, and will often involve a subjective judgement. However, the positive aspects of failure might encourage us to persist beyond the first failure, at least to some extent. 'Realistic optimism' is a useful element of the appropriate mindset towards failure, and where this does not come naturally it is possible to develop a response of 'learned optimism' that is more well-founded than mere wishful thinking.

Minimise occurrence of failure
While failure has many upsides, it is not usually our goal to fail. Instead we are seeking success and achievement, and failure blocks our path. Since our goal is to reach the next success zone as quickly as possible, we need to minimise the Failure Zone (FZ) and spend as little time there as possible. We should therefore be seeking strategies to reduce the occurrence of failure as far as is practicable. This is the realm of traditional risk management, and there are many proven approaches, tools and techniques to assist in identifying, understanding, assessing and managing risk.

Much has been written about risk management, but the key points bear repeating here. Risk can be defined as 'uncertainty that matters', and risk management offers a forward-looking radar, scanning the way ahead to identify any future uncertainties that might affect progress towards our objectives. This covers negative uncertainties (threats) that might cause problems if left untreated. But the concept of risk also includes the upside: positive uncertainties (opportunities) that might offer additional value or benefit if we could capture and exploit them. The goal of risk management is to minimise threats, maximise opportunities and optimise the chance of success. Clearly this would result in thinning the FZ and making our path across it as quick and as painless as possible.

Maximise value of failure
The third strategy in responding to failure is to use it to gain as much advantage and information as possible. Failure offers a range of lessons, as indicated by many of the ten characteristics outlined above. It is important for us to take time to capture these valuable lessons and ensure that we learn from our failures. In this way we can build up a body of evidence-based wisdom and experience that we can use to inform our future decisions and behaviour.

In order to implement this strategy we need to build learning time into our routine. Whenever a situation leads to failure, either individually or corporately, we should stop to reflect. What happened here and why? What could/should I/we have done differently? What were the internal and external influences, and can we affect these in future? Who could help me next time I face a similar situation?

Lessons need to be identified, captured and recorded in a way that helps us to remember them in future, so that we can truly become learning individuals and organisations. We need to take the maximum value possible from every instance of failure, turning it into a genuine learning experience, and then we must make any necessary changes to avoid future similar failures.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Australian actor Paul Hogan is famous for creating the character Crocodile Dundee, with his down-to-earth no nonsense approach to life. In his films the hero faces a wide range of diverse challenges and overcomes them with a winning combination of ingenuity, grit and good humour. In

real life Paul Hogan has also faced his challenges, many of which he has overcome in true Dundee-style. He characterises his approach as follows: 'The secret of my success is that I bit off more than I could chew, and chewed as fast as I could!'

This epitomises the approach to failure and success which is recommended in this book. As poet Alfred Lord Tennyson said in his poem *In Memoriam* (1850), ''Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' Or we might quote the well-known motto of the British Special Air Service (SAS) 'Who dares wins.' Or perhaps the words of Churchill might resonate: 'Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.'

There seems to be only one sure way to avoid failure and that is never to do anything. But this in itself is failure of a different kind. In this chapter our exploration of the nature of failure and its relationship with success suggests that true failure consists of not trying at all, giving up too soon, or not learning and changing when confronted with failure. Success comes from accepting the reality of failure, taking realistic steps to minimise its occurrence, and learning as much as possible when it does happen. Only when we know how to fail successfully can we become successful failures.

The subsequent chapters in Part 2 provide a rich demonstration of the concepts described in this chapter. Drawing on the insights and experiences of successful failures in a wide range of settings, we learn about failure at individual, group, corporate and societal levels. These chapters show the concept of failure in action and point the way to ensuring that wherever failure is encountered it is addressed successfully.