

Putting Failure in Its Proper Perspective

Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, October 31, 2011

Does your job allow you to fail three times out of four attempts? How would you feel if you (or one of your direct reports) were successful only 25% of the time?

As I write this article, I'm watching the World Series on television. Okay, so it's probably not fair to use major league baseball as a comparative example with your job, but please tolerate my analogy. (When I was a kid, my dream was to be a big league ball player. In high school, however, I learned you need skill as well as desire! The same is true, interestingly, when it comes to leadership.)

If you know baseball, you're probably aware that the typical player's batting average is just over .250. If you don't know baseball, you may not even know (or care) what a "batting average" is.

A batting average is the number of "hits" a player makes divided by the number of official "at bats" experienced. The result is reported as a three digit decimal.

The typical major league baseball player averages only one hit out of four attempts! A .300 batting average is considered quite respectable; yet that's a success rate of only three out of ten times.

No one has successfully hit .400 or better for a full season since Ted Williams did it in 1941. As productive as that was, it is still six failures out of every ten at-bats!

Alex Rodriguez, the highest paid player in history (\$30 million in 2011), has a lifetime batting average over eighteen seasons of .302. That is, he, too, has failed at the bat seven out of ten times.

Let's take a different approach. Almost everyone has heard of Babe Ruth. "The Babe" is probably best known for hitting 714 home runs in his career, a record that stood from 1935 to 1974. What's less known, however, is that he struck out 1330 times, almost twice as often as he hit a home run!

Let's take a more current record holder. Barry Bonds hit 762 home runs, more than any other player in history. Over his 22-season career, Bonds also struck out 1539 times. Though he failed even to hit the ball at twice the rate as he hit home runs, the fans came expecting to see his power at the plate! (His lifetime batting average, by the way, was .298, another seven failures out of ten!)

How does all this reference to failure apply to your leadership? No one, including you, can accomplish beneficial service without experiencing a lot of failure! It just comes with the territory!

Sometimes, when dealing with a tough situation, a leader will ask, "How is a person supposed to determine an appropriate decision here?" I'll respond that it's impossible to know what the right answer is; the choice comes down to the individual's judgment.

The person then asks, "How does a leader develop good judgment?" I chuckle and answer, "By exercising bad judgment, recognizing the mistake, and learning from it!"

Most leaders with significant responsibility usually have some age on them. Why? Because it takes time to make enough mistakes, learn from them, and develop good judgment.

When you fail--and we all will-- what you do next is extremely important. There is no value in wallowing in anguish or feeling sorry for yourself. Time will continue to pass, and there will be future opportunities to make decisions. Learn from your mistake, raise your awareness, and move forward.

Whether it's your job or baseball, people usually don't think about your failure rate. The number and quality of your successes is what captures the imagination and pays the bills! Further, you have a responsibility to serve as a resilient role model to those who look to you for direction.

Acknowledge your mistake. Figure out what you can do better next time. Now, let's play ball!

Dennis Hooper is a leadership coach, helping organizations build future leaders. Contact him at dhooper2@juno.com. Call him at (404)-575-3050. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com.