

www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/ct-oped-0622-page-20110622,0,3949337.column

chicagotribune.com

Failure is now fashionable

Clarence Page

June 22, 2011

Nothing succeeds like success, but don't sell failure short.

That's the sunny side up view of life that appears to be busting out all over the big-thinking world of the business and economics press these days.

Bookstores, for example, offer new fail-friendly titles that all but invite you to flop. There's "Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success" by John C. Maxwell, "Fail Better" from Herter Studio and "Fail Up: 20 Lessons on Building Success From Failure" by talk show host Tavis Smiley. I have yet to find a book titled "Fail Down," but I would not rule it out.

The Harvard Business Review, normally a road map to the success track, recently devoted a special "failure issue" to articles with titles such as "I Think of My Failures as a Gift" and "Managing Yourself: Can You Handle Failure?"

"Failure chic" is what commentator Rob Walker, of public radio's "Marketplace" business program, calls America's sudden fascination with failure. But don't make too much of it, he warns. After all, sometimes a failure is just a failure. Failure can indeed lead to innovation, Walker suggests, but failure mostly is best avoided.

That's true, but in these times of bankruptcies, layoffs, downsizing, off-shoring and foreclosures, our failures have a lot to teach us about how we can pick ourselves up and ultimately succeed. That's the message in a groundbreaking "failure chic" book, "Adapt: Why Success Always Starts With Failure," by Tim Harford, a Financial Times columnist.

Harford, best known for his big seller "The Undercover Economist," thinks big. Wars, poverty, innovation, climate change, the global financial crises and other big challenges have become too unpredictable for ready-made solutions and expert opinions, he argues. Instead, we must adapt. Most successful enterprises, he argues, are built through trial-and-error baby steps, not big planning. We must not be afraid to improvise and take risks.

That, in a nutshell, expresses the basic "atta-boy, atta-girl" pep talk message of the failure chic books I've seen. If I have saved you the trouble of buying and reading them all, you're welcome.

advertisement

Local news



- [Fed cuts GDP forecast: no hint of more support](#)
- [Obama to unveil plan for Afghanistan troop withdrawal](#)
- [FedEx profit jumps, expects robust 2012](#)
- [No let-up in pressure on Greece despite vote](#)

[Adlesse](#)

Frankly, the best expression of the winning-after-losing message that I've heard this year came from a guy who has high credibility on the subject of crushing setbacks: Conan O'Brien.

He famously achieved a comedian's lifetime dream when he was named host of "The Tonight Show" — until Jay Leno decided to take the job back. O'Brien wound up hosting a new late-night show on TBS. In a hilarious yet poignant commencement speech at Dartmouth College that has become a YouTube sensation, O'Brien speaks well of the lessons that the experience taught him.

"In 2000 I told graduates (at Harvard), 'Don't be afraid to fail,'" Conan tells the grads. "Well, now I'm here to tell you that while you should not fear failure, you should do your very best to avoid it."

He also warns parents: "You will spend more money framing your child's diploma than they will earn in the next six months."

But in the end he waxes serious long enough to talk about the lessons he learned the hard way by failing to hang on to his lifelong dream of hosting "The Tonight Show" after he achieved it. As miserable as he felt, cast out into the wilderness of unemployment and "mid-priced chardonnay," it turned out to be "the most satisfying year of my life," he says.

He tried out new ideas and reinvented himself in ways that were more rewarding than he ever expected. "There are few things more liberating in this life," O'Brien says, "than having your worst fear realized."

In the end he says he learned that "it is our failure to become our perceived ideal that ultimately defines us and makes us unique.

"It's not easy," he adds. "But if you accept your misfortune and handle it right, your perceived failure can be a catalyst for your profound reinvention."

True enough. Of course, it pains me to mention that O'Brien's move to TBS bumped George Lopez's talk show to a later hour, unfortunately duplicating the situation that caused O'Brien to leave NBC. That's showbiz.

But if Lopez is looking for a good book on how to recover from a setback, I have several suggestions.

Clarence Page is a member of the Tribune's editorial board and blogs at chicagotribune.com/pagespage.

cpage@tribune.com

Twitter @cptime

Copyright © 2011, [Chicago Tribune](http://www.chicagotribune.com)