

Helping Gen Z Learn to Fail - Well

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Fail fast. It's a mantra burned into the brains of every tech startup entrepreneur and employee. But, in reality, most people prefer to fail safely or not at all. This may be especially true for Gen Z.

The first members of this cohort, born after 1997, recently entered the workforce. They experienced milestones from high school graduation to college firsts in a mode of permanent crisis with daily social media reminders that others may be more successful or having more fun than they are.

This generation is stressed and, according to McKinsey and Company research, faces unprecedented emotional health challenges. So it's no surprise that they also have a heightened aversion to negative events, including failure. In fact, perceptions of failure can impact a spectrum of mental health disorders.

Today, we are seeing an uptick in Gen Z mental health benefits claims. At a time when three-quarters of managers find Gen Z workers more challenging to work with than other

generations, nearly three-tenths of Gen Z workers say they struggle with mental health because of their bosses. Most newcomers are afraid of making mistakes, especially after transitioning from a multiyear fully remote work environment and entering very different workplaces than previous generations have experienced.

Business Leaders Step Up

Strategies to learn from failure are critical to building business and personal resilience and are essential to success. Business leaders can and should help rewire Gen Z to support their mental health and move them to a mindset that failure is a building block rather than a roadblock. To shine a light on failure as a natural path to success over time, leaders can take several actions:

Encourage an environment of “failing well” that is built on psychological safety, allowing and encouraging team members to bring forward mistakes for discussion and learning. The more your team talks about errors, the more a culture of safety and continuous improvement can thrive and benefit Gen Z, teams and organizations. Create smaller forums for discussion to encourage people to air different perspectives.

Understand the science of failure. Seek out opportunities to think about, discuss and practice failure wisely. Read up on the science of failure, from psychology research to business insights like Amy Edmonson’s *The Right Kind of Wrong*. Be sensitive to generational considerations with failure—Gen Z, Millennial and Gen X employees may respond differently to the same leadership approaches.

Build on near misses. It’s about modifying behavior and judgment based on previous experiences—there can be big learnings in near misses as seen in industries like healthcare and aviation. Surface the “almost” big mistakes to foster innovation and progress without the same potential negative costs.

Role model and share your own fails to inspire your team. Explain how failure helped you learn, grow and succeed. Channel your experiences with failure to engage in empathy and better connect with Gen Z struggles.

Gen Z’s Homework

Gen Z employees are not spectators in the process to improve their resilience and learn from failure. They should consider the following:

Redefine failure as a natural part of growth and professional development. Gen Z employees should understand that if they are not failing, they are likely not optimally growing or learning. Embrace constructive criticism, assessment and evaluation by managers and peers as well as recommendations for improvement. Recognize that these are steps progressive and caring companies take to support employees and their long-term growth.

Make your own mistakes. When it comes to failure, personal experience is key, over and above learning from someone else’s mistakes. The act of personally generating solutions to failure

forces deeper learning, processing, understanding and ultimately better outcomes and future success.

Own your neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to learn and adapt. It can be activated in response to challenges and stressors such as failure. In effect, failing produces the neurochemical state necessary for learning. You can intentionally rewire your brain to create positive habits around failure.

Find your limits. The same neurochemicals that promote neuroplasticity can also cause emotional distress, frustration and demotivation. You will need to assess your current ability to mitigate the negative emotional aspects of failure. Be patient. Personal tolerance is unique to you and built over time.

We are still learning to define failure and reshape what it means in the workforce today. But, in general, today's stakes feel highest for Gen Z. They are the newest entrants to the workforce and are up against unprecedented economic and societal pressures. Think inflation, the prohibitive costs of housing, the lightning fast changes in technology and social media and the transformative—but not necessarily purely positive—potential of artificial intelligence. Learning from failure might be one of the most important lessons Gen Z needs today.

Don't just fail fast. Fail well.