



# Shaping the Future



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## Accepting Failure

by John Chilman

One of the most important leadership tools we can give our students is the ability to process failure effectively.



In the famous 1992 movie, "A Few Good Men," Sam (played by Kevin Pollak) says to Daniel (played by Tom Cruise), "...and I got you Dramamine because you hate to fly." Daniel replies, "I get sick because I'm afraid we're going to crash into a mountain, Sam. I don't think Dramamine helps for that."

Steve M. Nash created a research tool (Brainstorm It!) that allowed him to compile the top "fears" that people research on the Internet. While the fear of flying is number one on the list, and the fear of public speaking is a close second, number seven on the list is the fear of failure. I understand wanting to avoid crashing into a mountain. I think very little can be learned from this. The same cannot be said about failure.

**None of us is perfect. We know that. This means that we will all fail at one time or another. A true test of our character is how we respond to that failure.**

As a young man, Abraham Lincoln went to war a captain and returned a private. Afterwards, he was a failure as a businessman. As a lawyer he was too impractical and temperamental to be successful. He turned to politics and was defeated in his first try for the legislature. He was defeated again in his first attempt to be nominated for Congress. He was defeated in his application to be commissioner of the General Land Office. He was defeated in the senatorial election of 1854. He was defeated in his efforts for the vice presidency in 1856. In 1858 he was defeated in an election for a sixth time when he again ran for Congress. At about this time, he wrote in a letter to a friend, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth."

### What if President Lincoln's parents had attempted to shield him from failure?

What if he himself would have been so afraid of failure he would have avoided even trying because of what failure might bring? It is not only normal to experience failure; it is to be expected. Great leaders not only learn how to overcome failure but, more importantly, how to deal with it. We are creating a culture where we give the impression that if your desired goal is not achieved, the task should not even be attempted. We have taken to heart the words of Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*, "If you ain't first, you're last!"

One of the most important ways we can help students learn to deal with failure is by giving them direction. Once they have direction they should be allowed to take the initiative to make intelligent decisions and to do what they think is best.

**Great leaders not only learn how to overcome failure but,**

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"We teach your student how to fail" would not work well as a school's motto. How would you talk to parents (and students) about the concept of "how to fail?" Who are some people who experienced failures, didn't quit, and went on to make positive contributions to society? Who appeared to be the greatest failure that ended up the greatest victor? What can you do to help students deal with and grow from failure?

Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of Shaping the Future:

**[Finding Common Ground in Running and Teaching](#)** by Mark Newman (Feature)

**[The Common Core Standards](#)** by Dr. Pamela Zimmermann (ETnet)

**[Evaluation: Bane or Blessing?](#)** by Neil Sandfort (LEADnet)



Independence creates responsibility. Responsibility

**more importantly, how to deal with it.**

creates freedom. With freedom comes the ability to acquire morals and values. With morals and values comes the ability to make choices that will be both right and wrong. Remember the tree of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden?

Leadership is one of the most important skills anyone can possess. Independence is a key ingredient in leadership.

Independence helps a student not follow the crowd for the sake of following the crowd. Leaders make good decisions and set examples for others by thinking for themselves. Leaders have strong personalities and are usually very level headed; they fight for what they believe in and don't buckle under pressure. If students believe it's possible and they have the drive to succeed, they can make their dreams a reality. Find ways for students to develop these skills in a group setting, which promotes teamwork and social skills. You can also encourage students to look for leadership opportunities within clubs and organizations that need active members. A good friend of mine once said, "A leader can inspire but he can not motivate. Motivation is a drive that must come from within." A student or a teacher or even an administrator will not develop motivation or drive unless he or she chooses to do it on their own.

As educators we can create an environment where students feel safe to attempt new things. I tell parents all the time, "Do you really want the first time your child fails, to be when they lose five million dollars for Microsoft?" In all seriousness, people have killed themselves over such situations. Arguably the greatest inventor in the modern era was Thomas Edison. He was asked once how he did not get discouraged as he failed several thousand times before he invented the light bulb. His reply was that he did not consider the attempts failures but merely 3,000 ways to not make a light bulb. Edison was only 30 years old when he said, "Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up."

**As educators we can create an environment where students feel safe to attempt new things.**



Character is just as important as independence when it comes to developing leadership skills. From a Christian standpoint one could even argue it is the most important. All teachers know that teachable moments are spontaneous and occur numerous times on a daily basis. Good teachers take advantage of these opportunities even at the risk of not getting through the "ever holy" lesson plan. A friend once said, "Never assume that the most important thing that happens in a child's life occurs in your classroom." I would amend that a bit and say, "Never assume that your lesson plan is always exactly where the Holy Spirit wants to lead." Don't misunderstand me, being prepared is expected

and valuable. However, when one is teaching about cell division in biology and a student has a question about the chapel topic of the day or the latest hot button political issue, the teacher must decide whether this is a teachable moment. Every day? No, Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time and a season for everything. As a former English teacher I must unfortunately acknowledge that there **is** a time for biology.

Many have heard the joke, "Jesus was the greatest teacher of all time and he was only able to reach 11 out of 12." Romans 3:23 tells us that all sin and fall short of the glory of God. None of us is perfect. We know that. This means that we will all fail at one time or another. In fact we know this all too well. We know and realize that we fail every day... A LOT! A true test of our character is how we respond to that failure. History tells us how Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Edison responded to failure. In John Chapter 8 the Pharisees bring an adulterous woman to Jesus. At the end when the Pharisees clear out, Jesus simply says to the woman, "Go and sin no more." Give your students the freedom to fail and provide a safe environment in which to do so. When they do, be Christ-like and help them up, dust them off, and simply tell them to go and sin no more. Do not rejoice in their failure, but make sure it is not a stopping point. Encourage them to try, try again.

**Give your students the freedom to fail and provide a safe environment in which to do so. When they do, be Christ like and help them up, dust them off.**

God gave us free will because He knew that true love meant having the option to make bad decisions. We as educators and parents need to do the same. It hurts to see my children fail, but I tell my wife all the time that I hope they fail often while they

are under the safe umbrella of our house and a Christian school where teachers care about them greatly. It is in this type of environment where they have the freedom to discover exactly what it is that God is equipping them for in their lives. Failure is never fun. Failure should never be our goal, but in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "My greatest concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure."

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ShapingtheFuture is published three times a year by Lutheran Education Association and distributed to members of LEA.  
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