

Risk Failure to Succeed

BY FRED M. LANG



Learning leaders must be unafraid to risk failure and employ creative thinking to win battles and produce stellar results.

Two boys grew up in Ohio during the early 1800s. They attended the same school and graduated within three years of each other. They met at a crossroads in their careers but only one walked down the path reserved for the exceptional leader. Historians have written volumes about one while the other essentially became a footnote in history. What was the difference between the two? Why did one make such a significant contribution while the other is barely remembered? Here are their stories.

Two Men, Two Perspectives

This is a tale of two American Civil War generals who attended West Point at the same time. The first general, George B. McClellan, came from a wealthy family. He entered West Point at age 16 and graduated second in his class in 1846. He distinguished himself in the Mexican War; left the military to take an engineering job with a railroad; and then later re-entered the military when the Civil War broke out. Not long after, he was assigned to study Napoleonic warfare in Europe which resulted in a book he published in 1861, *The Armies of Europe*.

He appeared to have all of the right qualities for a great leader, so President Abraham Lincoln called him to Washington to assume command of the Army of the Potomac in July 1861. McClellan spent most of his time instilling discipline in his troops through constant drilling. The men in his command greatly admired him for his extreme confidence. However, he was overly cautious in everything that he did. He could never seem to find the right moment to advance against the enemy. Although he had the larger army, he always would ask Lincoln for reinforcements, requests which were always denied. Time after time, he was unwilling to take a risk and pursue and capture the opposing forces and thereby end the war. He failed to bring the war to a close due to his inability to take

risks and Lincoln finally replaced him.

The second general, Ulysses S. Grant, grew up in a small town in Ohio, where his father was a hard-working tanner. His early years in school were unremarkable except for his demonstrated love of horses. In spite of his low grades, his father was able to secure an appointment for him to West Point, and he graduated in the bottom half of his class. After graduation, he served in the Mexican War and was posted to various forts around the country. In 1854 he resigned his commission and returned to work with his father as a clerk in his leather shop. For several years, he failed to adequately support his family or earn a decent income. When the Civil War erupted, he rejoined the Army and began to rise in rank.

Grant encountered a series of tactical military challenges during some of his early battles in the Civil War that caused him to retreat from his position and risk severe defeat. Each challenge caused him to rethink his position and find an alternate way to achieve success. His unconventional military tactics, stubborn tenacity and courage to embrace risks as a military commander and leader won him success on the battlefield, which caused Lincoln to say: "I can't spare this man — he fights." The rest, of course, is history.

What can we learn about risk, failure and success from these two stories? It could be that one must expose oneself to failure in order to drink the sweet wine of success. Failure prepares the leader to walk down the path to exceptional performance and results because it equips the leader with valuable experiences and critical insights that can only be gained when things go wrong.

There is risk in failure, certainly, but we must experience failure a time or two if we are to become great learning leaders for our organizations. Not everyone is willing to take risks — some organizations are quite risk averse — but staying in one's comfort zone lacks excitement as well as the satisfying fulfillment

IN PRACTICE

RISK THE RIGHT FIGHT FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE

Most people in the business world have been told by teachers, managers, colleagues and business gurus that the single most important thing leaders have to get right is alignment. To accomplish anything, employees must agree about the mission, strategy and goals of an organization. Aligned employees are happy employees and happy employees are productive employees.

Simple, right? In a word, no. Many people mistake the comfortable feeling that alignment brings for the real conditions necessary for optimal performance.

A well-aligned, smoothly functioning team can do a bad job well or a job that shouldn't be done at all. The Titanic, by all accounts, was being run smoothly and well when it collided with an iceberg and sank. Because the team of sailors believed the ship was unsinkable, they ignored the initial signs of danger until it was too late.

Ditto for Lehman Brothers, the investment bank that had one of the strongest cultures of teamwork and loyalty on Wall Street. The company hit its own virtual iceberg and sank, almost taking the entire global economy with it in 2008. The organization was also aligned around a belief in an unsinkable ship and the leaders were running it smoothly. Up until the moment water began pouring over the side and the ship began to tip into the ocean, the team was happy and satisfied with its lot.

Don't misunderstand. Alignment is important. It's necessary. A company cannot win with a team that is badly aligned. But it's not sufficient. Achieving perfect or near-perfect alignment is not the end of the road. It's merely the beginning.

Let's take this a step further. Counter to conventional wisdom, the dirty little secret of leadership is that a leader's time is not always best spent trying to help teams make nice and get along. They don't tell students this in business school. Quite the contrary. Business school, like everywhere else in the management world, is constantly harping on the value of teamwork and alignment.

But in an environment where alignment is the only goal, alignment robs us of necessary dissent, of the checks and balances that mitigate risk and of the tensions that create innovation and sustainable value.

Tension is productive. A certain amount of healthy struggle is good for organizations and for individuals. Indeed, people and organizations perform optimally when they are under the right kinds and amounts of stress.

The concept of creative tension is not new. It's in the Bible, the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita. It's been written about in the lives of artists, musicians and scientists who have created breakthroughs that have changed the world. The U.S. Constitution depends on it and we call on it as a motivating force every time we go out to vote. All successful treaties between nations — not to mention all successful relationships between people — work because it is possible and empowering to release the energy inherent in tension in creative ways.

It follows then that a key aspect of a leader's job is to create the right battles and to make sure they are fought right. Right fights unleash the creative, productive potential of teams, organizations and communities. Right fights make for better possibilities and right fights lead to better results.

With alignment and properly managed tension, organizations hit a sweet spot and start realizing their potential. With right fights, organizations can achieve breakthrough performance, real innovation and leadership growth.

Right fights encourage diversity of views, they engender checks and balances, they inspire complex thinking and respect for difference. They are the cauldron in which new ideas are heated and mixed into the stew of new markets, processes and products. They are the fuel of human innovation, and they provide a rich training ground for future leaders. [CLO](#)

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of success springing from failure. If a learning leader is not taking risks, that individual is likely not doing what the organization expects or needs to differentiate itself amidst competitors. The CLO must have the confidence to lead through the future's ambiguities by creating a change-ready, adaptable learning culture capable of preparing the workforce to meet unexpected challenges. A learning-ready workforce will know how to be creative and innovative in the search for solutions that will give the organization an edge in the marketplace.

Dare to Tread

In order to meet unforeseen challenges, the CLO may need to walk down a path that he or she has never trod before. The challenges that CLO will encounter may require him or her to test new ideas, develop new strategic partnerships, redesign existing processes or even abandon them and think out of the proverbial box. It is that unconventional thinking and risk-taking that will lead to unconventional solutions. Greatness and its companion success are rarely achieved by playing it safe. Both of these states of being are achieved by exposing oneself to failure, and in the event things go wrong, beginning again while learning from the failure. CLOs in the trenches likely will agree with this strategy.

In order to prepare to confront and overcome the obstacles on the journey to great leadership, consider the following steps:

- 1. Develop a network:** This is critical to the success of any major enterprise or any leader. A leader's trusted peers and colleagues will help that individual navigate his or her way to the other side of the bridge. Further, these trusted allies often can teach and mentor their colleagues, relaying the best practices they have learned from encountering similar obstacles. Essentially, they can provide needed advice and perspective.
- 2. Understand stakeholders:** Find out who the key stakeholders are and get into their heads. Finding out what they need and what they want will help the learning leader develop a win-win scenario, where both parties get what they need from the

initiative or challenge on the table. In the final analysis, the solution must address the needs and concerns of these stakeholders.

- 3. Become a critical thinker:** It is through the process of critical thinking that a learning leader hones the ability to think outside the proverbial box and arrive at unconventional yet workable solutions. General Grant was not willing to accept defeat so he created unconventional tactics to win his battles.
- 4. Become a chess player:** Do not just dwell on the immediate outcome of a strategy or a set of tactics. Instead, understand the outcome and the impact of a course of action two to four steps ahead. This will give the learning leader the confidence to expose him or herself to risk. However, do not let confidence become arrogance. No one has all of the answers and most people can benefit from input from stakeholders and peers who are familiar with the problem. An arrogant attitude actually may prevent an individual from achieving a goal.
- 5. Decide if the goal is worth the risk:** Once the leader is convinced the goal is worth the risk, find a way to accomplish it. Initially the CLO may stand alone in support of some initiatives.
- 6. Develop resiliency:** All great leaders experience some failures on their paths to success. How they recover, learn from each failure and move on will define who they are. President Lincoln failed 16 times on the way to the White House. These failures included both business failures and failure to get elected in various political contests prior to his election in 1860 as the 16th President of the United States.

If learning leaders are not exposing themselves to the risk of failure, they are not exposing themselves to the risk of success. Learning leaders who always play it safe and accept the obstacles placed in front of them as immovable should take a step out of their comfort zone and move toward the leadership path that will dictate who they might become. **CLO**

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