

Turning a failure into a success down the road

BY ELEFTHERIOS P. DIAMANDIS

The famous professional heavyweight boxer Rocky Marciano retired undefeated, scoring 49 wins, a still-standing record. But very few know that Rocky was knocked down twice in his professional career. In both cases, he got up and finally won the fights.

There are numerous other examples of startling comeback wins in almost all sports. Such turnarounds require courage, perseverance and a relentless fighting spirit. But this is not enough.

To succeed in the long term, you also need critical analysis of adversity, thinking and planning for the future.

The three post-failure phases

Every one of us has faced adversity in our professional and personal lives; defeats are part of the game, and turning defeats into wins is not easy. How many of us have failed exams, messed up interviews, been denied jobs or promotions? And how have we coped with such adversities?

An adverse event usually is associated with three phases.

In phase 1, which starts just after the failure, the usual reaction includes devastation, disappointment, denial and anger, sometimes in combination with blaming just about everybody else for what happened. Blaming others might involve saying the examiners were not reasonable or were biased, the questions were unfair or unexpected, and the like. In this phase, even various forms of discrimination may come to mind.

This initial phase is followed, around one to three days later, by the more thoughtful phase 2, in which the event is analyzed further either by the candidate alone or with the help of one or more close friends or family members. A most useful task during this period is to find out why the failure happened. Was it poor preparation, inexperience, stress or something else?

Once the root cause is identified, phase 3, the phase of planning to avoid another failure, is a lot more productive.



Rocky Marciano's dedication is memorialized with a U.S. stamp and a statue in Italy.

IMAGE CREDIT: I FRATELLI ANGELO E GIORGIO BONOMO OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Things to keep in mind

Here are some simple tips that can help turn failures into successes:

1. Do not blame others for your failure. Usually, people are not out to get you.
2. Find out the root cause of the failure. The best people to provide feedback are your judges, and on many occasions, you are allowed to ask them for feedback. They may tell you that your knowledge was not enough or that your response to their questions was not effective. If you can't interact directly with your judges, find an experienced interviewer or reviewer who can listen to your story and provide feedback on the possible causes of your failure.
3. Remember that everybody gets another chance, either for the same opportunity, a related one, or something different. Do not feel that this failure is the end of the world, because it isn't. Just try to prepare better the next time and avoid the mistakes you made before.
4. Ask somebody, preferably somebody who succeeded in a similar scenario, to train you with mock examinations or interview questions. There are many fatal mistakes that can be made during an interview, and good preparation and practice can help you avoid them. For example, responding to a question with a statement like, "I am not sure about the answer, but here is one," will

give the impression that you throw answers around to see if they stick. This is usually worse than saying, "I do not know, but I will look it up later."

5. Trust that the failure has given you valuable experience and that the next time, with early and better preparation, you will come a lot closer to success.

6. Keep a positive attitude about the future; do not allow the failure to demoralize you or cause you to question your abilities. Think of your previous successes and persist.

Imagine what would have happened to Rocky if he had not stood up and fought after those devastating knock-downs. He would not have made it into the history books, and nobody would remember him. The fact that he prevailed in those two fights made his career memorable. When you go to the next round of competition, think of Rocky and learn from his courage.

A football player recently was asked how he felt after losing a whole season to an injury, and he had a very positive attitude: "It is a small setback for a big comeback." The same can happen to you. Your next big comeback is just around the corner.



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- University of Delaware's problem-based learning site, www.udel.edu/inst/index.html.

What do you think?

The Seattle workshop participants were graduate students, undergraduate science faculty members and faculty members who are interested in improving undergraduate pedagogy. As this project moves forward, designing a useful and usable BMB education toolkit will depend on input from the ASBMB community.

What are your thoughts about and suggestions for

building a BMB teaching toolkit? Email rcn@asbmb.org with your comments.

For more information about the ASBMB's role in developing concept-driven teaching strategies for biochemistry and molecular biology, visit www.asbmb.org/NSF/NSFHome.aspx.

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