



# TEAMWORK INTELLIGENCE

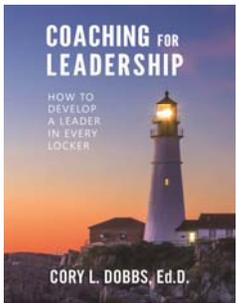
THE EDULETTER FOR SPORT LEADERS

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## Learning from Failure

### ***How Reality can Derail Leaders***

*"It's not enough to know how to lead; you need to know how to build leaders too."*



Failure is a loaded word, one that I'm sure instantly conjures up a last second loss to a despised opponent. Or a season of promise that went awry. How about the time you tried to implement something you learned at a coaching clinic, only to realize the tactic or scheme didn't fit as nicely with your system as you thought it would. Failure is a permanent part of life.

Therefore, it's probably a good idea to learn from it. Leaders who are blind to their failures rarely learn the valuable lessons that, with time and an open heart and curious mind, can serve up a healthy dose of reality. Painful as it can be, failure teaches.

Research on human cognition clearly shows that we are more reactive than most of us think. We tend to believe that we are in control of our thoughts, feelings, and actions; but a large number of research studies show that much of what we do and think, in addition to feel, is often driven by unconscious processes. This mistaken understanding leads to overconfidence in our way of seeing things. We think we see the world as it is, but we are really missing a healthy slice of life.

Working with a wide-range of coaches over the years I've identified three categories that help assess personal failure. Think of your failure as fitting into the following three types:

Type 1: Failure in what we do or don't do.

Type 2: Failure of who we are.

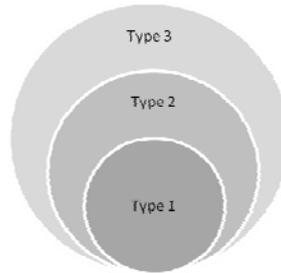
Type 3: Failure of who we want to be.

Leadership Resource!

Coaching for Leadership

*One of the most critical decisions every coach makes is whether to let team leaders develop in a "do-it-yourself" style or deliberately implement a leadership development program.*

Check Out Our New Leadership Resources



*"You have the capacity to transform yourself every time you learn from your personal failures."*

As an observer of organizational behavior it's clear to me that most people are hired for their skills and experience, but fired for their character—or lack thereof. At the heart of the failure to recognize our failure is our human desire to avoid discomfort. Rather than take the time and invest the thought and emotion necessary to examine our failures, we seek to move forward and chase a better tomorrow. For many of us, the very idea that we've failed is uncomfortable and threatens our sense of self.

It takes courage to confront failure, especially when it's attached to who you are—your character—who you want to be. We all know we make mistakes, that our life is rife with lapses of principle, flaws in our personality, and moments of incompetence. But how we choose to "see" these personal failures determines what we learn. Learning from failure is an essential element of effective leadership.

Unfortunately many leaders, from the boardroom to the playing field, lack the ability or willingness to take a hard look at themselves. Taking the time to do this is the only way to bear fruit learning from your failures.

## Learning from Failure

Most coaches I know get lost in the day-to-day activities of their sport. Once the season starts, coaches lose themselves in the minutia, the events, the drama, the ups and downs. This focus leaves little time for self-reflection; the kind that might reveal the need for transforminmg behavior. Instead of confronting personal failure, they operate from the principle that all that matters is tomorrow; the next game.

Pause for a moment. Consider, for example, the amount of time you spend thinking about a tough decision made regarding the handling of a challenging player. How likely are you to question your actions? During the season you invest a substantial amount of emotional energy to defend your decisions, finding ways to be right. The net effect is that you avoid deep reflection on issues of Type 2 and Type 3 failure, and often disregard how Type 1 failures drift into the other two types.

The root of the problem lies in thinking that results from what you do are separate from who you are. Many coaches are tempted to excuse such things as poor behavior in order to deliver great results on the playing field. When this happens, they can hide behind the results, and the more positive the results the more likely they'll continue the poor behavior. Results trump everything.

Failure is relevant to human behavior and powerfully developmental. If we learn from our failure we increase the possibility of raising the level of our performance. For this, we need to commit to taking a critical look at our abilities, emotions, and personality in the frame of our personal failures.

Let me be clear: you are blind to many of your failures. It is frustrating and exhausting to be with leaders who deny their personal failures. Perhaps this is what Laing (1981) meant when he said, "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds." And let me conclude by saying that you don't need to fail to notice. You can decide to focus on failures. You have the capacity to transform yourself every time you learn from your personal failures.

## Case in Point

**What Happened:** Years ago as a young assistant coach I worked for a head coach prone to verbally tearing down the players. One player in particular caused him to escalate this tactic. The head coach would criticize and devalue the player's abilities and contributions. On more than one occasion he tried to intimidate the young athlete by maliciously attacking his character.

Unfortunately, I did nothing. And silence was compliance. Silence is the act of withholding a stand or commitment. Loyalty... Well loyalty when done right, it binds. But it also blinds.

**The Result:** Ultimately, the player, taking a bold stand, called the coach out during the half-time of a game. He'd had enough and in the heat of the moment chose to not take it anymore. He was immediately suspended and never returned to the team.

**Lesson Learned:** One major lesson I learned was to ask myself the vital leadership question: "*How did I contribute to this problem?*" any time failure occurs. This question puts me in an ownership position, and the answer is likely to produce healthy leadership actions.

By remaining silent I effectively endorsed the head coach's actions, thereby contributing to the growth of the problem. I did not take a stand. My failure to take action drifted quickly from a Type 1 failure to a Type 2 failure. I questioned my character; and rightfully so. I should have acted from my character, taken a stand. If the coach was interested in building a committed partnership he would have welcomed my concern. A vital characteristic of high performing teams is that members identify, confront, and overcome blind spots. Asking others for their view is a powerful and accurate way to find out about reality. Doing this, we then can learn from our failures.