



## THE MYTH OF LEARNING BEST FROM FAILURE

by Christian Rook

Do you also believe that we learn best from Failures? Science suggests otherwise:

We've all heard the phrase: **"Failure is the best teacher."**

But what, if that's **not actually true**?

A groundbreaking study by **Lauren Eskreis-Winkler and Ayelet Fishbach (Psychological Science, 2019)** reveals a surprising truth: people often fail to learn from their own failures.

**My personal experience:** I was once hired to turn around a production facility in the plastic molding industry when, one day, a machine operator rushed into my office—pale and visibly shaken—to report an accident. During a tool change, a 250 kg molding tool had slipped from the crane because he hadn't fastened it correctly. It missed him by mere inches.

When I asked him about the accident, he simply shrugged and said, "Well, **we all only learn from mistakes**. This company nurtures is **a mistake culture**, corporate tells us. So let bygones be bygones—I got lucky and will never make this mistake again."

I disagree with the overall accepted power of learning from one's mistakes. This person could have been dead. Mistakes, errors, failure often have **consequences**.

**So why do people so often fail to learn from their mistakes (other than the above mentioned severe life changing consequences)?**

The research found that failure **threatens our ego**, making **us tune out** rather than process valuable lessons. When confronted with failure, many **disengage emotionally**—meaning they don't absorb the information needed to improve. In contrast, people learn **far more effectively from success feedback**, as it reinforces what works.



### The Twist: Learning from Others' Failures Works!

Interestingly, when people observe others failing, they absorb the lessons just as well as they do from others' successes.

Why? Because their own ego isn't on the line. This suggests that while personal failure can be emotionally challenging, watching and analyzing failures from a distance can be a powerful way to improve.

### Takeaway:

Instead of just "embracing failure," try creating a learning-friendly environment where mistakes aren't seen as threats but as opportunities for objective reflection. And don't just focus on your own missteps—observe others, analyze patterns, and learn without the emotional baggage.

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