

Interviewer: As a segue into your new book, here's a quote from you that I'd like to have you explain a little bit more. You say, "Every organization or leader experiences failure. It is the biggest most valuable yet untapped resource to success." Is failure something you embrace, or something you avoid?

John: No it's certainly not to avoid it, although you'd love to think that everybody could do it. The fact of the matter is, that most organizations spend most of their time dealing with failure, and each of us as individuals do. We create failure in imaginative ways all the time, every day. When you look at the actual statistics here, the fact is that if you're starting a business, most businesses are going to fail in their first 18 months, or certainly in their first five years. Most new products fail. Most mergers and acquisitions fail.

There's recent research that suggests most senior hires actually fail. Most New Year's resolutions fail. Most patents fail. Failure is part of the default condition. It's why Mark Cooper Smith, my co-author for this book, "The other F word," use the analogy of gravity. Failure is like gravity. It's a fact of everyday life, now we can try to ignore it, we can try to defy it, but if we really want to use it, we have to begin to think of it differently. Think of failure not as a regrettable event, which it almost always is, because it's painful, it's embarrassing, it's tough to talk about.

Think about it more as a strategic resource. Think about it more as containing secrets that it's up to us to figure out, because the one thing that failure does that almost no other resource that we manage can do, is it contains secrets of what we didn't know before that we probably should know going forward. The way I like to say it sometimes is that failure is today's lesson for tomorrow, because that's really at its essence what it offers an organization, what it offers us as individuals if we're honest enough, and humble enough, and maybe with a little sense of humor can talk about it and acknowledge it.

Yes you'd like to avoid it, but chances you're not going to be able to, then the question is how do you put it to use? How do you really put it to work? There's been a lot written about this topic, which is not surprising, it's a universal issue. Everything from special issues of the Harvard Business Review, Scott Adams who is the creator of Dilbert who's one of the people we interview in our book has done a very wonderful book about his own personal experience with this. Mark and I wanted to write a book that we thought went at a different issue here, and as we put it in the subtitle of our book, it's really a question about how smart leaders, teams, and entrepreneurs put failure to work.

We've seen a lot of other pieces about failure. Some of them fall into what we call the Hoorah category. These are the autobiographies, and biographies of great people, and the message is I struggled, I persevered, I succeeded. Those are wonderful pieces, they can be inspiring, but it's very hard to figure out how to put them to work on Monday when you go back to work. The second category is what we call the Rah Rah category. It's the Silicon Valley cheerleading, fail fast, fail often, failed forward and all of that.

Frankly we think people have heard that a lot, and it's good as far as it goes, but it doesn't really again help you connect to the practical challenges of what it means to deal with failure, and put its lessons to work in your own organization. The third category is what we call the Blah Blah category. That's the realm of personal improvement books, interesting, and potentially very helpful on a one-to-one basis, but something we didn't feel particularly qualified to write.

We wanted to focus on what the challenges are of managing around failure, management with it, living with it, and applying it to the strategic agendas of our readers in their organizations.