Successful Leadership through Failure and Mental Health

Presented BY:
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Mental health and diversity play big roles in today's office, at home, and on main street. Let's take a step back and discuss how managing expectations through the acceptance of failure helps us to bolster DEI and Mental Health while ensuring a successful project and timeline.

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Let's get on the same page about…

- Failure - Oxford vs Einstein
  - Oxford English Dictionary, failure is the lack of success.
  - Einstein "Failure is success in progress".
- Forgiveness - Oxford vs Oprah
  - Oxford English Dictionary, forgiveness is the act of stopping anger or resentment towards someone who has made a mistake or offense.
  - Oprah Forgiving is giving up the hope that the past could be any different. True forgiveness is when you can say "Thank you for that experience."
- Empathy - Oxford works - Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- Communication - American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
  - Communication is the active process of exchanging information and ideas. Communication involves both understanding and expression.
- A safe environment for failure…

YOU GONNA LEARN TODAY

What is a safe environment for failure?

An environment to share failures so they can be understood as a way to move toward success instead of an opportunity to place blame.

- Encourage open communication
- Lead by example
- Create psychological safety
- Emphasize learning and growth
- Provide resources and support
- Support and collaborate
- Be transparent
- Celebrate the effort

Encourage open communication

When communicating with your employees, ask them to bring forward successes, opinions, thoughts, and even what we typically think of as bad news.

Wrong approach - You found out that your employees have a skip-level meeting with your direct leader. You know that some employees have a difficult time with you so you decide to setup a one-on-one with them and "coach" them on what they should say during the meeting.

Right approach - A better approach would involve recognizing the skip-level meeting as a valuable opportunity for employees to share their experiences openly. Focus on fostering a transparent and trusting environment. This can be achieved by engaging in genuine one-on-one conversations, encouraging honest feedback, and expressing openness to constructive criticism. Emphasize the importance of their autonomy during the meeting and show that their input is valued and will be used to grow as a leader and support the team effectively.

Experience - Almost every time that I have taken over a team my arrival has been met with hesitance and an understandable level of mistrust when it comes to being accepting of open communication. To help combat this I talk about some of the trials and tribulations that I've seen in my life, I talk about my therapy once a week, and I talk about how much I value diversity in opinion. As time goes on I look for the opportunities to foster this and solicit feedback from the team. I make sure that when someone brings up a concern I address it. Over time this builds and reinforces trust within the team.

Lead by example

When you have to deliver news upstream do it from a posture of success.

Wrong approach - How do you go about presenting a missed opportunity, do you go into that review session and say "Well, we screwed up." If so, you are leading through fear and unhealthy failure. How you present yourself in those scenarios is how you are likely leading your team(s). Set the example that you want them to follow.

Right approach - I prefer to go into these events well versed in the event, leading in with what the goal was, what was achieved, and what was learned. Moving into what went "wrong" and how the team responded to that. Acknowledging what we did wrong (emphasis on we, and not the team or they), acknowledging what we got right and expressing the lessons learned from the experiences. Finally wrapping it all up by putting forward our plan(s) on how such experiences will be avoided in the future.

Experience - When my team(s) come to me with incidents, I expect them to approach me in the same manner and they know this. When they don't know how to, or when they fail in their approach (yes I used the F word to make an impact) then I help them by working with them to reword or reapproach.

Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull said, "If we as leaders can talk about our mistakes and our part in them, then we make it safe for others."

Create psychological safety

Psychological safety means feeling safe to take interpersonal risks, to speak up, to disagree openly, to surface concerns without fear of negative repercussions or pressure to sugarcoat bad news.

Wrong approach - There was an water spider who's equipment kept getting taken by another associate on the floor. When the water spider approached management they were told "What's the problem, just go find another one." The water spider picked up their stuff and started to leave for the day, feeling defeated, undervalued, and unheard.

Right approach - On their way out they talked the events over and John (a manager) as brought in to discuss the occurrences. It was expressed that equipment is hard to find and doing so changes metrics. For someone who is trying to convert from temp to full time this causes a lot of pressure. It wasn't just one time that the water spider had to go find new equipment, it was many, and they usually found the same associate with their newly found equipment. John heard the frustration, acknowledged the problem, agreed that they too would be frustrated in this scenario and even admitted that their co-managers approach would have defeated him too.

Experience - When I make a mistake my team will call me on it, depending on the audience they will either say something directly (in a team meeting as an example) or they will hit me up in private on chat (in a more public meeting). My response is always to acknowledge my part and thank them for bringing it to my attention. Depending I might ask how we can address it properly, I may offer how I will change my approach in the future, or I might simply just accept my part.

Emphasize learning and growth

Don't just judge based on success/failure of a project, ticket, or incident. Encourage everyone to bring forth and discuss ongoing learnings.

Wrong approach - Only evaluating projects, tickets, or incidents based on their completion dates of velocity, without considering the learning process. This mindset discourages open discussions and growth, leading to missed opportunities for improvement.

Right approach - You can foster a culture where ongoing learnings are valued and openly discussed with some simple changes to process. Once a week (adjust frequency from observations), maybe at the end of stand up, have a ticket review discussing what was learned from all the closed tickets. How effective was the approach, would that same approach be used again and why? Another option is to encourage members to share something they are currently learning or interested in periodically. This can result in some very interesting conversations, don't shy away when someone wants to talk about training their dog, or a watering system for their gardens.

Experience - On one team we had these monthly meetings where we would go around the virtual table with each team member talking about the things they are doing outside of work, their interests, and sometimes their hardships. We'd shelf work topics completely. This worked to create a team that was almost like a second family, offering up advice on gardens, recipes from across the globe to spice up normalized menus, and so much more. Everyone enjoyed working together and even when there was contention on work subjects the comradery built helped people to work through tension in respectful ways.

Provide resources and support

If you see a gap in your teams capabilities don't always fill it with a new body, provide resources to the team to learn new things and expand their knowledge. When a team member comes to you with an opportunity, do what you can to support them (eg: find conference funding, support charity work when you can, or maybe offer paid days instead of PTO).

Wrong Approach - The company has decided that they are going to move from all of the legacy CICD platforms that were built using TFS, Jenkins, Bash Scripts, and widget wonders to GitLab. You don't have this skill set within the team and you have a rapid timeline for delivery. So you work with your contracting vendor to replace one of your existing resources with ones that know GitLab.

Right Approach - You have an open discussion with the team about the need to standardize the delivery platform across the project. One (or more) team members seem very driven and opinionated on the subject. You work with them to create a timeboxed story in Jira and agree to review how far they can get when the sprint is complete.

Experience - Set up weekly calls with your team to put yourselves in a customer's shoes:
- Always have a devil's advocate identified for the call. Rotate through the advocate to allow all to refine their ability to look at problems from other perspectives.
- Members of the team bring forth a conversation they thought could have gone better.
- Practice Reflective Conversation, Safe Speak, Imagio Dialog, Active Listening, etc… as a team within these meetings.

Support and collaborate

Structure your teams in a way that encourages them to support one another and collaborate. Don't keep that structure static, move people around to diversify the knowledge and experiences.

Wrong approach - You've created your frontend team, your backend team, you have your API team, and you have your deployment engineers. They work with the appropriate storage team (DB, Block, NAS) when they need storage. Everyone has to work with the infrastructure team because everyone needs systems at the end of the day.

Right approach - Initially teams are structured around specific product features, creating deep expertise and also silos. To promote collaboration and knowledge sharing, implement a rotational system where engineers switch teams periodically. This exposes team members to different parts of the system, enhances problem-solving skills, strengthens cross-team relationships, and breaks down knowledge barriers, ultimately improving adaptability and engagement.

Experience - Features came in at a rapid pace, each one was clearly defined with a strict mathematical approach given. Upon receiving a new feature we would create a team of 1 Mid and 2 Jr's that would implement the feature. A senior oversaw 3 sets of these teams. Once the feature was delivered then the teams were dissolved and the members went on to another feature. On average we could turn a feature in under a day meaning that members were constantly working on new things and working with one another.

Be transparent

Maintain an open-door policy and actively listen to concerns, fostering transparent and truthful communication, especially during times of significant change like downsizing or restructuring. Honest dialogue builds trust, reduces uncertainty, and encourages collaboration as individuals navigate challenges together.

Wrong approach - Have you ever been caught off-guard by a layoff? Your manager calls you into a room with several of your co-workers, not the entire department, just a portion. There is a Human Resources member at a table with a look that you know is either "You didn't make the cut…" or "Only the people in this room made the cut…"

Right approach - The numbers are down and the budget for next year is going to be tight, management is asking where they could save money across all departments. Rumors of layoffs are floating around the watercooler. At the end of standup the subject of layoffs comes up. Address this head on acknowledging the emotional concerns, acknowledge the funding issues, openly discuss options, and offer to take conversations offline if anyone doesn't feel comfortable in the forum.

Experience - The company was being sold and the new owners were moving it to Texas. The engineering department was small, and the owner was scared that if they told everyone what was going on they would lose all the employees. As the manager I felt it more important to give the heads up on what was coming. I explained to everyone that the owner was ready for retirement and that there was a new owner coming, I explained moving the company, and I explained that I didn't know if jobs could be remote or relocated. Some were excited about an opportunity to move to Texas, some had opportunities locally to move to, and some were content to see where things went.

Celebrate the effort

Even if the team or individual doesn't reach the goal, celebrate what they did do or the lessons that they learned from the experience(s). Often the value isn't in done.

Wrong approach - If the team or individual fails to reach the goal, focus solely on what went wrong, there's no value in celebrating partial successes or lessons learned. Make sure to ensure individuals focus on their accountability to prevent complacency. This approach dismisses the importance of recognizing progress and the growth that comes from challenges, which can be crucial for morale and long-term success.

Right approach - Even if the team or individual doesn't reach the goal, acknowledge and celebrate the progress they made and the lessons they learned through the process. Recognizing efforts and growth fosters resilience, strengthens morale, and equips them with insights for future challenges.

Experience - While leading a rather large Angular project the lead engineers came to me and wanted to switch from Angular to React. In their minds they could better support the goals of the project by making such a change, it would allow them better component reuse. Upper management was hesitant to make the change at first, yet there was a 30 day downtime where the team had nothing to do that was agreed upon as a time they could make the swap. At the end of the 30 days the team had migrated 80% of the codebase from Angular to React. Rather than focusing on the miss (didn't migrate 100%) it was realized the HUGE undertaking they had made, celebrated, and the company spent the next 3 months finishing the migration. Then migrated all other products.

But wait, what about DEI?

Diversity: Reflecting a broad range of characteristics within the workforce, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, socioeconomic status, and more.

Equity: Ensuring fair treatment and access to opportunities for all employees, addressing potential inequities through proactive measures to level the playing field.
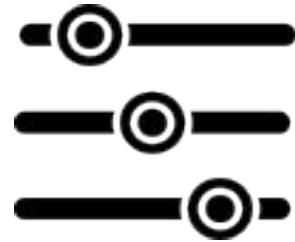
Inclusion: Creating a workplace environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and able to participate fully, regardless of their background or identity.

A team that accepts failure fosters **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)** by creating a psychologically safe environment where all employees, regardless of background, feel empowered to take risks, share ideas, and grow.

- **Encourages Diverse Perspectives** – When failure is seen as a learning opportunity rather than a punishment, employees from different backgrounds feel more comfortable contributing unique ideas without fear of judgment. This leads to more innovation and problem-solving.
- **Reduces Bias and Unequal Treatment** – In environments where failure is harshly punished, marginalized employees often face disproportionate scrutiny. Accepting failure fairly ensures that all employees, regardless of race, gender, or experience level, have equal opportunities to learn and advance.
- **Promotes Growth and Learning** – A failure-tolerant culture encourages continuous improvement and skills development, benefiting employees who may not have had the same privileges or access to resources in the past. This levels the playing field and promotes equity in career advancement.
- **Enhances Psychological Safety** – Employees from underrepresented groups often fear making mistakes due to stereotypes or biases. When failure is normalized, they feel safer expressing ideas, taking risks, and being authentic in the workplace.
- **Supports Inclusive Leadership** – Leaders who embrace failure model humility, resilience, and growth, setting an example that diverse experiences and learning curves are valuable. This fosters a more inclusive workplace where everyone has the chance to contribute and succeed.

By normalizing failure as part of the learning process, companies create a more supportive and equitable environment where **diverse voices thrive, employees feel valued, and innovation flourishes**.

What about the timelines…

Normalizing failure leads to **better project timelines** by fostering a culture of rapid learning, adaptability, and efficiency. Here's how:

- **Faster Problem-Solving** – When failure is accepted, teams spend less time covering up mistakes and more time identifying and fixing issues early. This prevents small setbacks from escalating into major delays.
- **Encourages Experimentation and Innovation** – Teams are more willing to test new ideas and solutions without fear, leading to faster identification of the best approaches rather than sticking to outdated or inefficient methods.
- **Reduces Bottlenecks** – Employees feel comfortable seeking help and collaborating on challenges instead of struggling in isolation. This prevents delays caused by unresolved issues.
- **Improves Risk Management** – A culture that acknowledges failure encourages proactive risk assessment, helping teams anticipate potential obstacles and create contingency plans.
- **Enhances Team Morale and Productivity** – When failure isn't punished, employees feel less stressed and more motivated to contribute. This leads to higher efficiency, fewer errors, and a smoother workflow.
- **Promotes Continuous Improvement** – Teams learn from past mistakes and refine their processes, leading to progressively more efficient execution of projects over time.

Helpful tips on communication

- **Remove "But" from Your Language**: "But" negates whatever came before or creates a defensive tone. You can often replace "but" with "and". For example, instead of saying, "I see your point, but I think we should..." try, "I see your point, and I think we could also..."
- **Talk Without Criticism**: Focus on constructive feedback and express your thoughts without placing blame. Use "I" statements to share your perspective, like, "I feel we could improve this by doing..."
- **Listen Without Judgment**: Practice active listening by being fully present, withholding assumptions, and validating others' feelings or opinions without immediately evaluating or responding.
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions**: Encourage dialogue by inviting others to elaborate. Questions like, "What are your thoughts on this?" or "Can you tell me more about that?" show genuine interest.
- **Be Clear and Concise**: Avoid jargon or overly complex explanations to ensure your message is easily understood.
- **Use Positive Body Language**: Maintain open posture, make appropriate eye contact, and nod to show engagement.
- **Summarize and Paraphrase**: Repeat what you've heard in your own words to confirm understanding. For instance, "So what you're saying is…" ensures clarity.
- **Express Appreciation**: Acknowledge others' efforts and contributions to build goodwill and trust.
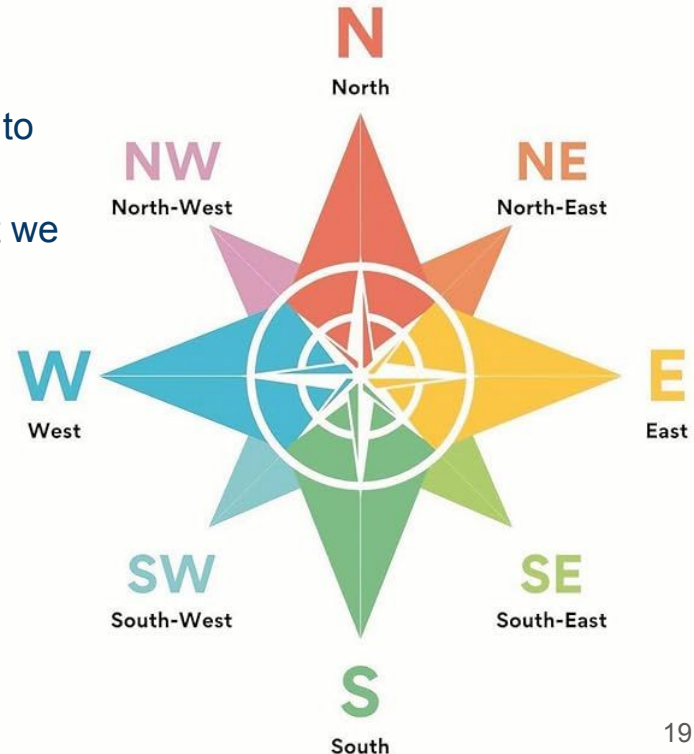
What are some questions to indicate success?

A leader can assess whether they have fostered a **safe place to fail** by reflecting on these key questions:

Psychological Safety & Team Culture

- Do my team members feel comfortable admitting mistakes without fear of punishment or embarrassment?
- Are employees willing to ask for help and share challenges openly?
- Do team members give each other constructive feedback and support learning from failures?
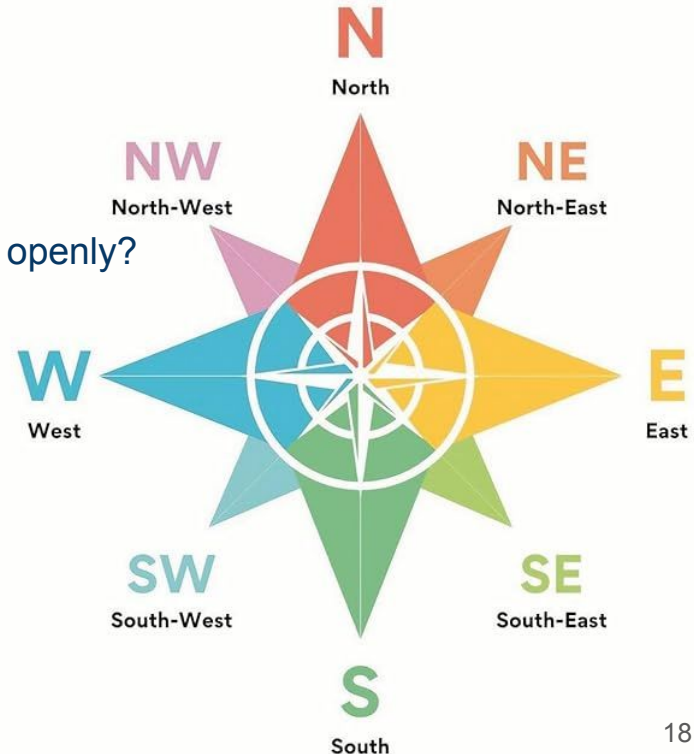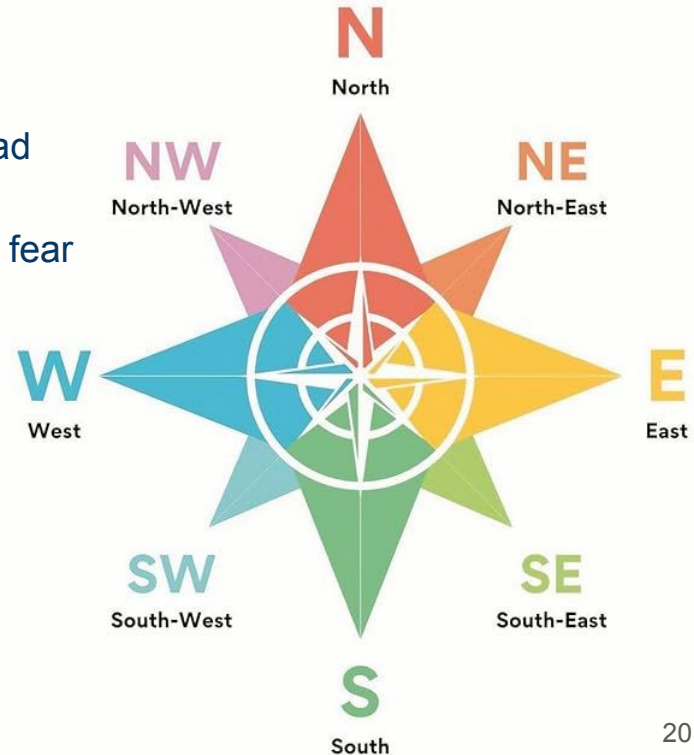
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Communication & Transparency

- Have I openly shared my own failures and lessons learned to model a growth mindset?
- Do I encourage open discussions about mistakes and what we can learn from them?
- How often do I receive honest feedback from my team, and do they feel safe providing it?
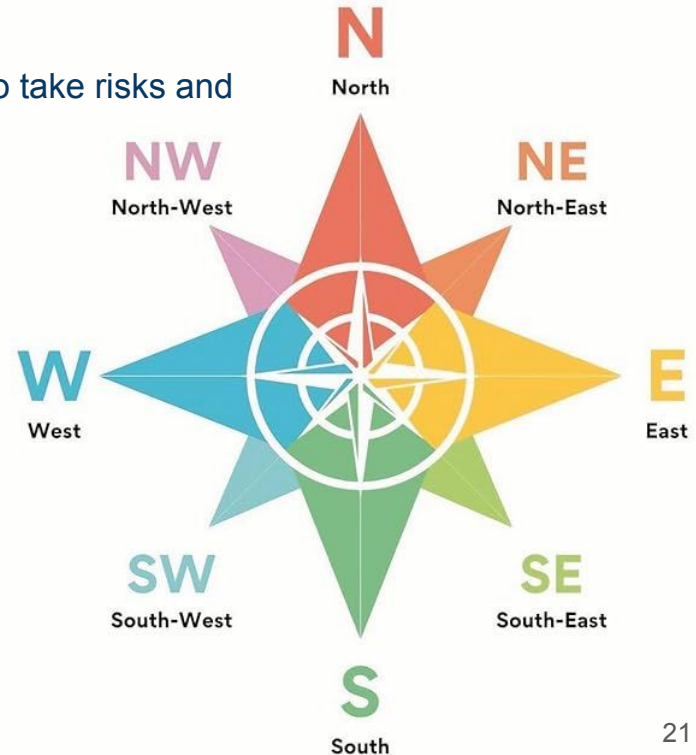
What are some questions to indicate success?

A leader can assess whether they have fostered a **safe place to fail** by reflecting on these key questions:

Encouraging Experimentation & Innovation

- Do I recognize and reward efforts, even when they don't lead to success?
- Are employees encouraged to take calculated risks without fear of retribution?
- Do I provide opportunities for learning and growth when failures occur?

What are some questions to indicate success?

A leader can assess whether they have fostered a **safe place to fail** by reflecting on these key questions:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

- Do all employees, regardless of background, feel equally safe to take risks and share ideas?
- Have I ensured that failure is treated fairly across all levels and demographics of my team?

What are some questions to indicate success?

A leader can assess whether they have fostered a **safe place to fail** by reflecting on these key questions:

Long-Term Growth & Improvement

- Have I implemented processes to analyze failures and apply lessons learned?
- Is my team improving over time due to lessons from past mistakes?
- Are we continuously refining our approach to failure to create a stronger, more resilient team?
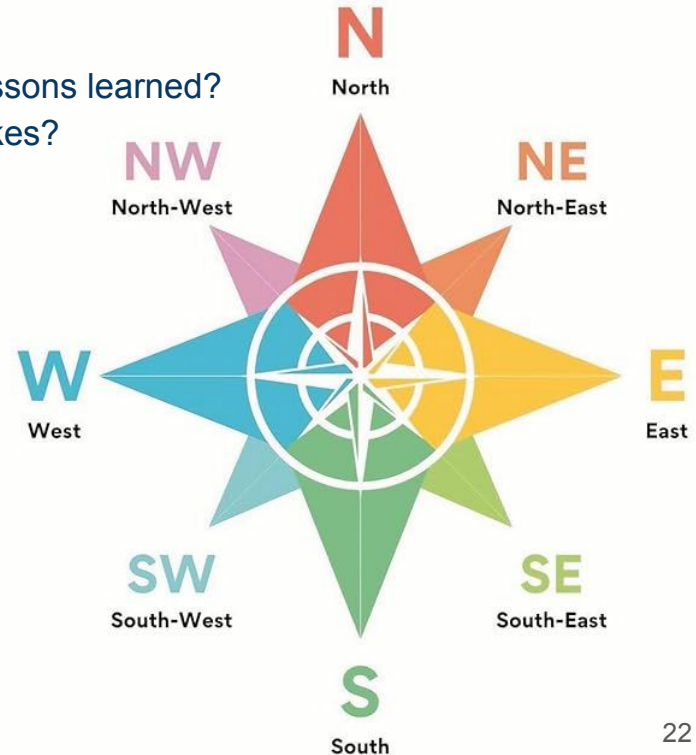
Final Thoughts

- **Failure is a Stepping Stone** – Embrace setbacks as opportunities to grow and learn.
- **Resilient Leaders Thrive** – Great leadership comes from overcoming adversity with courage.
- **Mental Health Matters** – Prioritizing well-being leads to sustainable success.
- **Lead with Empathy** – Supporting yourself and others fosters a stronger, more inclusive team.

As Confucius and Nelson Mandela are quoted as saying "Leadership is not about never falling, it's about always rising."

Questions?

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