**There is no failure, only feedback**

As change leaders we are conscious of the fact that there will be setbacks along the road we take on our change journey. The danger that faces all change managers is the premature framing of a setback as a failure that could derail or end the change project entirely. Therefore, it is important that we reframe the definition of a failure as an opportunity for constructive feedback so that we can move forward with a richer practitioner experience to move closer to our goals. Every experience has the seeds of learning embedded in its content and we can access this learning if we are open to the idea that it exists. If we frame an event as a failure, then we effectively close our minds to how we can leverage value from the experience and this framing may inhibit future personal and group development.

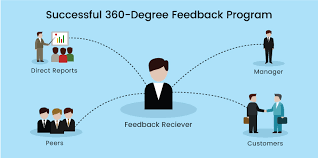
When we reframe we change the words we use and in doing so we change our perceptions, our belief systems and our attitudes. As change managers/leaders we work towards success, we prepare for success. However, we acknowledge that to be successful in terms of realising our ambitions we must take full advantage of all learning opportunities that are relevant to the ambition we are chasing. Therefore, setbacks provide an opportunity for constructive feedback; and thus, they are always a resource to help us step forward closer towards our goals.

We can learn from every situation and utilise these learnings to our advantage. When we define our state as one of failure, we close off the feedback loop and shut down the opportunity for learning and freeze our progress in relation to our goals and related ambitions. A critical aspect of change leadership is building a culture of organisational learning. If we, as change leaders, advocate a culture which identifies situations as failures, then we are making the possibility of establishing a learning culture, or a learning organization, far more problematic. By looking at every situation in terms of ‘feedback’ we can maintain an open mind and a curious attitude which permits curious investigation. Instead of blaming and punishing, in a climate characterised by psychological safety we generate curiosity and seek to learn from every situation. We ask ourselves the question “that’s interesting, what can I learn from this feedback?” Of course, we will feel emotions such as disappointment, sometimes frustration and even anger though it must be recognised that these are emotions to be held in a resourceful way and if they prevent organisational learning then the potential capital to be gleaned from feedback is lost to us.

In order to fully benefit from reframing setbacks as feedback, and thus learning opportunities, change leaders need to nurture the capability for accepting responsibility for their results and avoiding the defensive strategy of blaming others. It is very unlikely that people will trust in a potential leader who appears to shirk their responsibilities and seek to place the fault with team members. For example, if a group does not respond effectively and generate successful change outcomes, as unpalatable as this may be for some, it does signify a failure in group leadership. If one can accept this fact, then one can learn from the situation and reflect. The process of reflection opens the door to transforming the emotional, cognitive and behavioural strategies we have formed as habits and testing alternatives when engaging in what Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1996) calls ‘Double Loop Learning’ which requires three skills on the part of the change leader/manager:

1. Self-awareness
2. Honesty
3. Taking responsibility

Change managers/leaders need self-awareness to recognise how they could improve. They require self-honesty to recognise their own mistakes and they need to be open to feedback from colleagues and be prepared to openly discuss with other people how they can improve. One way of doing this is to build into the change programme 360-degree feedback mechanisms.



A 360-degree feedback loop ensures that all key stakeholders who report or interact regular with a change manager/leader will be afforded the opportunity of providing feedback on their experience of working with them and specifically on key competencies from their subjective experience. The purpose of the 360-degree feedback is to assist everyone to understand their strengths and weaknesses and to contribute insights into aspects of their work needing professional development. In summary, accepting responsibility for one’s social results, being open to feedback, acting on such feedback, and interpreting all kinds of setbacks as opportunities for learning and improvement are professional qualities that the change manager/leader should work towards nurturing and mastering.

**Key lessons**

Successful change managers use feedback in a positive way in that they frame setbacks, for example, not as failures but rather as feedback loops that can offer rich opportunities for learning and personal development. In contrast those who are less successful may view setbacks differently. They may perceive setbacks as failures, and this is an unresourceful strategy that closes critical reflection and thus team and individual learning. Perceiving a setback as feedback opportunity encourages learning and dialogue.