A person with long hair

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Reframing Fear of Failure

April 18, 2021

Hello friends.

I hope you had an amazing week.

We only have two episodes left in this Getting Unstuck series.

And they’re probably the most powerful because based on what I’ve seen in my corporate career and with my coaching clients, these two seem to affect most people.

This week, we’re talking about Fear of Failure. And it’s one that is near and dear to my heart because I think it holds so many of us back.

So, let’s dive in because there’s a lot to look at here.

Fear of Failure is the irrational fear that we won’t succeed at doing something that’s important to us.

This fear happens when we have thoughts that overestimate the risks that we associate with attempting to DO the new thing.

These irrational risk-based thoughts create feelings of fear, which cause us to engage in avoiding behaviors like procrastination, hiding, playing small and a host of other self-limiting actions.

So first, let’s look at what we mean by ‘overestimating the risks’ we associate with trying something new.

This tends to crop up when we’re trying something we don’t yet have experience in doing.

I mean think about it. If we feel competent at something because we’ve done it before, we have every reason to believe we can do it again.

This is where confidence comes from. It comes from looking at our past and knowing what we ‘for sure’ have successfully done.

If the new thing we want to go do is similar or the same as things we’ve already done before, we’re confident in our competence at doing the thing. So, `we likely won’t sink into Fear of Failure.

But when we DON’T have experience with the new thing we want to try or go do, that’s when we tend to overestimate the risks of doing the thing.

Psychologists refer to this as Catastrophizing.

There are two types. Catastrophizing about current or future situations.

Catastrophizing is when we imagine the worst thing that could happen, or we exaggerate the difficulties we’ll face in doing the thing.

The problem with catastrophizing is that we tend to enlarge the challenge.

This is because we’ll start with an observation of a potentially difficult thing.

Then this leads to a cascade of follow-on thoughts, each getting potentially larger.

For example, let’s say you are worried you won’t do well in a big presentation with some executives.

If you’re a catastrophizer, you might think “I’m terrible at presentations.”

Your catastrophic thought cascade then might look like this:

“I’m terrible at presentations.”

“I’m a total loser.”

“I’m going to lose my job.”

“I’ll be financially destitute.”

So, one meeting that you fear might not go well becomes you envisioning a future where you are homeless.

And guess what happens?

You go into the meeting preoccupied with your worry about potentially not doing well and so you’re anxious and stiff and not ‘on.’

And even though it might go okay, it probably wasn’t your best effort.

If you put this in the context of something really big you want to go do like maybe leave a company you’ve been with for 20 years, change career paths altogether or maybe start a new business, you can see how a tendency to catastrophize would get in your way.

Enlarging or exaggerating something you’ve never tried before kicks our fear and anxiety into high gear.

And then what do we do?

Most of the time, we delay trying to do the new thing.

We think about it and dream about it, but we never do it.

We get stuck.

We hide.

We stay in our safe little comfort zone, even though we might not LOVE where we are in our life right now, we try to convince ourselves that it’s better if we stay safe.

Maybe we try to convince ourselves that thing isn’t meant for us.

That if it WAS meant for us, we wouldn’t have so much anxiety about it.

This is allowing our fear of failure to keep us in the corner playing small.

So now that we understand how fear of failure gets us stuck, let’s look at what failure even means.

Do you know how you define failure?

It’s an interesting question. And I would guess that most people don’t know their definition.

Is it about giving up before you finish?

Is it about not achieving the desired result?

If you don’t have a clear definition of what it means to fail, I suggest you spend a little time asking yourself how you define it.

Because if there is something you really really want but you’re not going after it because you fear that you will fail, let’s at least know what we mean by failing, right?

After all, it could cost you your dream!

Here’s how I think about failure.

The only way I fail is when I quit.

Boom.

If I try something and get a result different from what I had planned on, I view it as a test and learn.

That’s a philosophy that I draw on from my marketing roots.

Very few things about marketing and advertising are formulaic.

The truth is market conditions, competition, channels, and people are always changing.

So, most marketers today think of everything they do as a test and learn.

You use the insights and data you have to make the best decision on how to achieve your desired outcome.

Then you launch it.

And then you analyze your results.

If the results didn’t meet your original plan, you harvest the learnings, adjust your plan, and run at it again.

This same philosophy works perfectly for those of us who indulge in Fear of Failure.

If you can reframe your view of learning to do new things as a test and learn opportunity, it neutralizes the pressure.

There’s nothing to feel fearful or anxious about because you are just trying. You might succeed or get to your goal on the first attempt and that’s great!

But if not, it’s not a failure.

You just look at what you did, decide what worked and what didn’t, adjust and run at it again.

Eventually you will find the right combination of actions and strategies that will get you to your destination.

You aren’t assuming you’ll nail it on the first try.

You’re making it okay for the thing you want to go do be a multi-step journey that you will figure out as you go.

So now there’s no reason to beat yourself up.

You see, for most people, the Fear of Failure is not necessarily about the challenges ahead or the effort needed, it’s about the consequences we imagine of what failing will mean about us.

We’re not afraid of the work we need to do to achieve that new thing.

We’re afraid that the wok we do will NOT BE GOOD ENOUGH.

So, by staying stuck, we’re really trying to avoid feeling the negative emotions of our work (or US) not being good enough.

We want to avoid emotions like:

Shame

Embarrassment

Disappointing those important to us

Loss of friends

Losing face

So next time you have something big you want to go do – something you haven’t done before so you can’t rely on past successes to assure you of your ability to do that new thing – try these two things:

1. Identify the consequences that scare you the most about NOT being able to be successful at the new thing? (Hint, they’re probably the emotional ones I described above).
2. What strategies could you put in place to DEAL with those consequences?

Successful people – the ones who go after all the things they want in this life – are those who learn to leverage fear.

Remember, what makes us fearless is not that we never HAVE fear. But that we’re confident in our ability to DEAL with the consequences of potentially trying something new and falling short.

And that we don’t make the falling short of the goal line mean ANYTHING negative about ourselves or our abilities.

Remember…if you decide to reframe failure to mean you’re testing and learning (like I do) there ARE no consequences. Only learning, adjustment and another run at it.

And that’s how you get from Fear of Failure to total and complete bad ass.

Until next time, make a great week my friends.