

THE BIG IDEAS

Hall of (Failure) Fame

Some worthy inductees.

The Oops Plaque

Where's yours?

Expectations

Keep them realistic. Aka, EXPECT challenges!

10 Reasons People Fail

Avoid them.

Take a Risk

Or take a REALLY big risk...

Failing Forward

Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success

BY JOHN C. MAXWELL · HARPERCOLLINS LEADERSHIP © 2007 · 209 PAGES

“What makes the difference? Why do some people achieve so much? Is it...

- Family background? Having a good family growing up is something to be grateful for, but it's not a reliable indicator of achievement. High percentages of successful people come from broken homes.
- Wealth? No, some of the greatest achievers come from households of average to below-average means. Wealth is no indicator of high achievement, and poverty is no guarantee of low achievement.
- Opportunity? You know, opportunity is a peculiar thing. Two people with similar gifts, talents, and resources can look at a situation, and one person will see tremendous opportunity while the other sees nothing. Opportunity is in the eye of the beholder.
- High morals? I wish that were the key, but it's not. I've known people with high integrity who have achieved little. And I've known scoundrels who are high producers. Haven't you?
- The absence of hardship? For every achiever who has avoided tragedy, there's a Helen Keller who overcame extreme disabilities or a Viktor Frankl who survived absolute horrors. So that's not it either.

No, none of these things are the key. When it comes right down to it, I know of only one factor that separates those who consistently shine from those who don't: *The difference between average people and achieving people is their perception and response to failure.* Nothing else has the same kind of impact on people's ability to achieve and to accomplish whatever their minds and hearts desire.”

~ John Maxwell from *Failing Forward*

I'm a big fan of John Maxwell.

I just asked ChatGPT for a brief bio. Here's what I got...

John Maxwell is a renowned leadership expert, author, and speaker who has written over 100 books, many of which focus on leadership, personal development, and growth. With decades of experience, Maxwell has influenced millions through his teachings on effective leadership principles, including his famous “The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership.” He is also the founder of the John Maxwell Company, which provides leadership training and development to organizations worldwide. Maxwell is highly regarded for his ability to make complex leadership concepts accessible and actionable.

Well, that's pretty solid, eh? :o

Thanks, ChatGPT.

*“We are all failures—at least,
the best of us are.”*

~ J.M. Barrie

"While one person hesitates because he feels inferior, the other is busy making mistakes and becoming superior."

~ Henry C. Link

Side note: I've asked ChatGPT about 1,000 questions over the last few weeks since I started using it—on everything from nutrition to training.

This is our fifth Note on one of Maxwell's 100 (!) books. The others we've featured include: [How Successful People Think](#), [Leadershift](#), [The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth](#), and his classic, [The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership](#).

I read this one as part of my recent peak performance/mental toughness binge as part of the work we're doing with more Heroic athletes, teams, and coaches.

As Maxwell says: If we want to forge excellence and activate our Heroic potential so we can fulfill our destinies, we MUST get REALLY good at using failure as fuel for our growth.

The book is packed with Big Ideas on how to do that. I'm excited to share some of my favorites. So, let's jump straight in!

HALL OF (FAILURE!) FAME

"On August 6, 1999, a major-league baseball player stepped up to home plate in Montreal and made another out—the 5,113th of his professional career. That's a lot of trips to the batter's box without a hit! If a player made all of those outs consecutively, and he averaged four at-bats per game, he would play eight seasons (1,278 games straight) without ever reaching first base!

Was the player discouraged that night? No. Did he think he had failed himself or his team? No. You see, earlier in the same game, in his first plate appearance, that player had reached a milestone that only twenty-one other people in the history of baseball have ever achieved. He had made his 3,000th hit. That player was Tony Gwynn of the San Diego Padres."

Maxwell kicks off chapter #2 of the book with that story.

Get this: John was actually at that game. Unfortunately, he arrived late—AFTER Tony Gwynn had made his 3,000th hit. Eek. But... Good news! He caught a foul ball Tony hit into the stands late in the game. (That's awesome.)

Want to know how to "fail forward"?

Keep your favorite Hall of Fame baseball player in mind.

btw. I just asked ChatGPT how many people have played in Major League Baseball.

Its answer? "As of the 2023 MLB season, approximately 23,000 players have appeared in at least one Major League Baseball (MLB) game. This includes all players from the league's inception in 1876 to the present day."

My follow-up question: How many people have made over 3,000 hits?

Goosebumps on its answer: "As of now, 33 players have achieved over 3,000 hits in Major League Baseball history. The 3,000-hit club is one of the most exclusive and prestigious milestones in baseball, highlighting a player's longevity, consistency, and skill at the plate."

That's CRAZY.

Over 23,000 (!) people have played in Major League Baseball. Only 33 of them have over 3,000 hits. That's 0.143%. Yes, I just asked ChatGPT to do that math. And yes, I LOVE that it's .143%. Mister Rogers would be fired up right now. ([See this +1 for the inside joke.](#))

Now...

I just asked ChatGPT to calculate the total number of at-bats for those 33 Hall of Fame players with over 3,000 hits. The total is 352,588 at-bats. They got a hit in 108,467 at-bats. That's a .339 average. You know how many times they FAILED to get a hit? Well they failed 66% of the time.

"Nothing worth achieving comes easily. The only way to fail forward and achieve your dreams is to cultivate tenacity and persistence. These qualities can be learned, partly by developing the habit of following through on your commitments when you don't feel like it."

~ John Maxwell

"Do you expect to do everything perfectly? Do you expect to succeed on the first try? How many mistakes should you expect to make before you succeed? Adjust your expectations."

~ John Maxwell

Or, as ChatGPT so articulately put it: *"The 33 players in the 3,000-hit club failed to get a hit a total of 244,121 times across their careers."*

If THE ABSOLUTE BEST BASEBALL PLAYERS IN HISTORY can fail THAT many times, you and I can swing and miss on occasion and still crush it. So... Let's.

P.S. Here are some of my favorite baseball-themed +1s: [Go 0 for 12 Lately?](#); [Thrown a Perfect Game Lately?](#); [Ty Cobb Playing Baseball at 70](#); [Dorfman and Stutz](#); [When Dreams Come True](#).

Note: Search "baseball" in the Heroic app and you'll find a total of 36 +1s and 40 PNs in which I reference my favorite sport growing up. :)

P.P.S. Maxwell also tells us: *"Thomas Edison believed 'Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.' If you can change the way you see failure, you gain the strength to keep running the race. Get a new definition of failure. Regard it as the price you pay for progress. If you can do that, you will put yourself in a much better position to fail forward."*

P.P.P.S. I can't go to the next Idea without sharing some [Carol Dweck](#) wisdom from [Mindset](#). She tells us: *"Michael Jordan embraced his failures. In fact, in one of his favorite ads for Nike, he says: 'I've missed more than nine thousand shots. I've lost almost three hundred games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot, and missed.' You can be sure that each time, he went back and practiced the shot a hundred times."*

Note: [Watch that Nike commercial here](#).

THE OOPS PLAQUE

"Any golfer can have a really bad hole—even a Hall of Famer like Arnold Palmer. The key to playing through it is to forget about your bad shots. That can be a difficult thing to do—especially when someone erects a bronze monument to your bad hole. That's what happened to Arnold Palmer.

It occurred at the 1961 Los Angeles Open at the peak of Palmer's career. On the par-5 ninth hole, his last of the day, Palmer hit a good drive and wanted to try to put the ball on the green with his second shot. He would be in a position to attempt a birdie, getting one stroke closer to the leaders.

With his 3-wood, Palmer hit what he believed was a good shot. But as the ball sailed, it faded to the right, hit a pole, and bounced out of bounds onto the driving range. Palmer dropped a ball, took a penalty stroke, and tried again. This time, his ball hooked to the left and flew off the course into a road. Again he dropped a ball and took a penalty stroke. He repeated this process, hitting the ball out of bounds several times. Finally, he put the ball on the green. By then, he had accumulated ten strokes. It took him two more strokes with his putter to hole the ball. He finished with a twelve. And because of that, he went from a few strokes behind the leaders to scoring so poorly he was out of the tournament.

Today, if you go to the ninth hole at the Rancho Park Golf Course in Los Angeles, you will find a plaque that states: 'On Friday, Jan. 6, 1961, the first day of the 35th Los Angeles Open, Arnold Palmer, voted Golfer of the Year and Pro Athlete of the Year, took a 12 on this hole.'

I read that and winced. Then I smiled.

I repeat the same theme: IF ONE OF THE GREATEST GOLFERS IN THE WORLD can take a 12 on a single hole, then maybe we can allow ourselves to not be perfect?

That's from a chapter called "Is the Past Holding You Hostage?" in which Maxwell makes the point that we need to LET GO of our past failures—using the Palmer story as proof of the fact that there NO PERFECT human beings. Period.

"Good golfers don't dwell on bad performances—not if they want to remain good golfers."

~ John Maxwell

" People who desire to fail forward must turn their attention away from themselves and toward helping others."

~ John Maxwell

Our last Note was on [Dave Alred's *The Pressure Principle*](#). He quotes another all-time great golfer when he tells us: "I dislike the term 'choking.' It has negative, almost cowardly implications. Many excellent, heroic performers have been unfairly labeled as weak under pressure, often by those who could not even begin to comprehend the kind of stresses involved in performing at the pinnacle of sport. As golfer Tom Watson says: 'A lot of guys who have never choked have never been in a position to do so.' And, in fact, it isn't mental fragility that causes choking at all; it's more like a lack of mental discipline, or a failure to organize one's thoughts when the pressure is on."

I also thought of a brilliant passage from [Greg Harden's](#) great book [Stay Sane in an Insane World](#). Greg worked with some of THE best athletes in the world. To put it in perspective, Tom Brady wrote the foreword to the book talking about how much Greg influenced his life.

Greg tells us: "So now it's all about your beliefs. It's about how you talk to yourself... It's all about how you treat yourself, how you talk to yourself, what you believe about yourself. ... I'm not talking about becoming a robot. When you fail, it hurts. It really does. And it should! You should let yourself feel that. I just gave up a home run and I'm not happy. I am going to acknowledge that this thing happened, and then I'm going to give myself permission to feel like crap about it.

For one-tenth of a second. Hit the start button on the stopwatch. Feel like crap. Hit the stop button. 00:00.10

Now get back to work. If there's something to learn from the mistake you just made, learn it. Make the adjustment. Hear the words in your head that reinforce your commitment to giving your best effort: I'm capable, qualified, and competent. And then move on. It's one trait so many of the greatest athletes I've ever known have in common: a short memory. My shot doesn't go in. I drop the ball. I miss the wide-open net. I give myself one-tenth of a second to feel bad, and then I keep playing."

As we discuss all the time, we need to MAKE IT A GAME.

Have the WISDOM to *know* that you will make mistakes. Quit acting surprised. Then have the DISCIPLINE to see just how quickly you can regain your equanimity and get back to crushing it.

Remember: You get one-tenth of a second. Then let go of the past and get back at it.

P.S. One of my go-to ways to get perspective is to remember some wisdom from [Michael Singer's](#) GREAT book [Living Untethered](#). Check out those Notes and [this +1 on Getting Perspective](#).

KEEP EXPECTATIONS REALISTIC

"The greater the feat you desire to achieve, the greater the mental preparation required for overcoming obstacles and persevering over the long haul. If you want to take a stroll in your neighborhood, you can reasonably expect to have few, if any, problems. But that's not the case if you intend to climb Mount Everest."

That's from a chapter all about the fact that "Achievers Keep Expectations Realistic."

As Maxwell says, if you're going for a walk around the neighborhood, you can reasonably expect to face a few obstacles.

But...

If you're planning to summit Mount Everest, YOU **BETTER** EXPECT TO FACE HUGE OBSTACLES. And you sure as heck don't complain about the bad weather up on Everest. (Right?)

I like to say that, when we're out on truly Heroic quests, we're not sidestepping LIZARDS.

"The difference between greatness and mediocrity is often how an individual views a mistake."

~ Nelson Boswell

"The worst danger we face is the danger of being paralyzed by doubts and fears. This danger is brought on by those who abandon faith and sneer at hope. It is brought on by those who spread cynicism and distrust and try to blind us to the great chance to do good for all mankind."

~ Harry S. Truman

We're encountering DRAGONS. Same basic idea.

[Kelly McGonigal](#) wrote a great book called [The Upside of Stress](#) in which she tells us that how we INTERPRET the stress we are facing determines how we experience it.

If we see stress as a THREAT to our well-being, we will respond *very* differently than if we see that same stress as a CHALLENGE.

And... Science says that our underlying physiology will dramatically change.

So... How are YOU viewing the stressors in YOUR life? Here's to bringing a smile to our faces as we summit our Heroic Mount Everests in our Energy, our Work, and our Love. TODAY.

AVOID THE TOP 10 REASONS PEOPLE FAIL

"A common obstacle to success is the desire to cut corners and take the short road to success. But shortcuts never pay off in the long run. As Napoleon said, victory belongs to the most persevering.

Most people tend to underestimate the time it takes to achieve something of value, but to be successful you have to be willing to pay your dues. James Watt spent twenty years laboring to perfect his steam engine. William Harvey labored night and day for eight years to prove how blood circulated in the human body. And it took another twenty-five years for the medical profession to acknowledge he was right.

Cutting corners is really a sign of impatience and poor self-discipline. But if you are willing to follow through, you can achieve a breakthrough. That's why Albert Gray says, "The common denominator of success lies in forming the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do."

That's from a chapter called "Avoid the Top Ten Reasons People Fail."

Before we take a quick look at those Top 10 things, let's pause for a moment and reflect on that [Albert Gray](#) wisdom. It's from his little booklet called *The Common Denominator of Success*. (Check out the [Notes](#).)

Know this: "The common denominator of success lies in forming the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do."

Spotlight on you... What's the #1 thing you KNOW you need to do more consistently?

Pro tip: Channel the successful version of you and DO THAT even if the "failure" version of you doesn't like to do it.

Now for the Top 10 reasons people fail according to John Maxwell.

1. *Poor People Skills* (How are yours?)
2. *A Negative Attitude* (Learn hope and optimism!)
3. *A Bad Fit* (Aka you're in the wrong environment)
4. *Lack of Focus* (Get your Energy FOCUSED on What's Important NOW!)
5. *A Weak Commitment* (Are YOU committed?)
6. *An Unwillingness to Change* (What do YOU need to change?!)
7. *A Shortcut Mind-Set* (as per the passage above!)
8. *Relying on Talent Alone* (Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard!)
9. *A Response to Poor Information* (Make sure the info you consume is solid.)
10. *No Goals* (It's hard to hit a target you haven't set, eh? What's YOUR #1 Target right now?)

"Humility comes before honor."

~ Proverbs

TAKE A RISK

*"Always bear in mind that
your resolution to succeed
is more important than
anything."*

~ Abraham Lincoln

"To achieve any worthy goal, you must take risks. Amelia Earhart believed that, and her advice when it came to risk was simple and direct: 'Decide whether or not the goal is worth the risks involved. If it is, stop worrying.' ..."

In life, there are no safe places or risk-free activities. Helen Keller, author, speaker, and advocate for disabled persons, asserted, 'Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.'

Everything in life brings risk. It's true that you risk failure if you try something bold because you might miss it. But you also risk failure if you stand still and don't try anything new. G. K. Chesterton wrote, 'I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act.' The less you venture out, the greater your risk of failure. Ironically, the more you risk failure—and actually fail—the greater your chances of success."

That's from a chapter called "Take a Risk."

When I read that wisdom about security from Helen Keller, I thought of some parallel wisdom from [Eric Butterworth](#). In his great book *Spiritual Economics*, he redefines some words including prosperity, affluence, and SECURITY.

He tells us: "The word *secure* comes from two small Latin words: *se* meaning 'without' and *cure* meaning 'care'—being without care, freedom from anxiety. Victor Hugo articulates this very special sense in this lovely couplet:

*Be like the bird
That pausing in her flight
While on boughs too slight,
Feels them give way
Beneath her, and yet sings,
Knowing she hath wings."*

Here's to remembering that the GREATEST risk is often not having the courage to do what you feel called to do.

And, channeling another Heroic woman, remember Amelia Earhart's wisdom and "Decide whether or not the goal is worth the risks involved. If it is, stop worrying."

And go out and give us all you've got as you Fail Forward.

TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.