

The Failure-Tolerant Leader

By Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes

"The fastest way to succeed" IBM's Thomas Watson, Sr., once said, "is to double your failure rate." People are afraid to fail, and corporate culture reinforces that fear. The presence of failure-tolerant leaders can help employees overcome their anxieties about making mistakes. In the process, they create a culture of intelligent risk-taking that leads to sustained innovation. Such leaders don't just accept productive failure, they promote it.

Failure-tolerant leaders break down the social and bureaucratic barriers that separate them from their followers. They engage at a personal level with the people they lead. They avoid praising or criticising, preferring to take a non-judgmental, analytical posture as they interact with staff. They openly admit their own mistakes, instead of trying to cover them up or shifting the blame. And they try to root out the destructive competitiveness built into most organizations.

Above all, failure-tolerant leaders push people to see beyond the traditional definitions of success and failure. They know that as long as a person views failure as the opposite of success, rather than its complement, he or she will never be able to take the risks necessary for innovation.