

## Creating Successful Leaders From Failures

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I was speaking with a business owner the other day about a recent catastrophe that occurred within his company. He and another senior leader in the company spent a good day and a half cleaning up the issue and the aftermath, and he was quite exasperated.

I asked him, “What did the organization learn from this?”

We often move fast to fix a problem and get operations back on par – but we rarely take the time to analyze what caused the problem in the first place and determine what can be done in the future to prevent it from happening again.

In the military – and often in corporate America – this is known as an After-Action Review, or AAR, and it’s an incredible way to develop your future leaders. Leaders are born from mistakes and lessons learned. Isn’t that how you got to where you are?

Yes, we have to address the problem, but once that is done, let’s not sweep it under the rug or cause people to feel guilty or embarrassed about what occurred. Instead, embrace it as a learning moment. You’ll not only build institutional knowledge and critical thinking skills, you’ll also build trust and loyalty – all of which are necessary for a strong leadership team.

Here are some simple steps to get started turning failures into successful leaders:

» **First, take a few days to cool off and allow everyone involved to be in the position to “reflect” on what occurred,** rather than being in the emotion (and possibly the blaming) of what happened.




- » **Gather everyone involved in a room with a whiteboard or flip chart.**
- » **Announce that failures happen – but the important next step is to learn from them and do better next time, and that is why you are conducting this meeting;** NOT to blame, but to identify failure points so that they can be avoided (or identified earlier) in the future.
- » **Identify what the event or issue was, e.g.,** A planned four-day turnaround on asbestos removal turned into seven days.
- » **Review the facts of what happened – from start to finish - and document them chronologically on the whiteboard or flipchart (one action per flipchart page).** Under each event identify the actions

taken, decisions made, and any key challenges or successes. Ensure that the group agrees on what factually happened.

- » **Engage the group in a discussion to identify what could have been done differently at each stage of the event.** Add these alternatives in a different color to each flip chart page. Encourage open and honest feedback from all participants. The benefit of arranging the flipcharts (or whiteboard) sequentially is that you can see cause-and-effect or dependencies more clearly. For instance, in the case of the asbestos removal project, was the overage caused by a poor estimate to begin with? Should you have scheduled a bigger team? Was there an equipment failure? Each potential “fix” will have to be considered in relation to events before and after the event itself.
- » **Finally, after you have identified what the failure point was in this event; stand back and look at the big picture.** Are there overarching lessons? These may include best practices, strategies, areas for improvement, and potential risks or challenges to be addressed in the future.
- » **Capture these lessons and recommendations in a clear and actionable format** such as a checklist or if/then diagram that can be easily accessed in the future as a preparatory document.

Interestingly, the Blue Angels (the elite Naval flying team) conducts an AAR after every performance – even when it went perfectly! Before the pilots go out to meet attendees of an airshow, they sit around a table and one-by-one review their own performance, delineating what they did well, what they could have done better, and what they intend to do to improve both their own and the team’s performance the next time.

When you make AARs “standard operating procedure” – like the Blue Angels - they become part of the learning and development culture of your organization and not an examination of events gone wrong. By following this process when all projects conclude, an After-Action Review can serve as a powerful tool building critical thinking and problem-solving skills of your future leaders. 



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## About the Author

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Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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