

AIMING HIGHER

**A JOURNEY THROUGH
MILITARY AVIATION LEADERSHIP**

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AIMING HIGHER: A Journey Through Military Aviation Leadership

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CHAPTER 3



EMBRACE FAILURE

*Perspective & Insight of
Robert Teschner*

As an Air Force fighter pilot, one of the most powerful lessons each must learn as they join the ranks of the top pilots in the world is to embrace failure. That lesson drives the purpose for the work fighter pilots do each and every day.

To embrace failure means to live in discomfort.

To embrace failure is to learn to be both humble and highly vulnerable.

“

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To embrace failure—to live through it and to consistently learn from it—is the most efficient and effective recipe for lasting success.

In order to embrace failure, we must leave ego by the wayside, and we absolutely have to learn to get over ourselves, to get out of our own way. In practice, embracing failure can be exceedingly difficult.

Of the myriad topics business leaders are mentored on, embracing failure is one of the toughest and, simultaneously, most rewarding that must be covered. The concept breaks down like this.

FAILURE ISN'T ALL BAD. IN FACT, IT'S MOSTLY GOOD.

A little insight into me: I happen to be a huge fan of the work of Dr. Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School. She's devoted her professional life to understanding what makes teams work and to helping organizations learn to build teams that win. She's also an advocate for the value and importance of failure in building real teams.

In her HBR article titled "Strategies for Learning from Failure," Dr. Edmondson introduces the world to what she calls 'A Spectrum of Reasons for Failure.' On one end of the spectrum, she lists events we traditionally view as blameworthy events which include both deviance and inattention. On the other end of the Spectrum, she identifies as "praiseworthy" events like hypothesis testing and exploratory testing.

And it makes sense. Let's say a person crashes the company truck because they were texting while driving. This would be a blameworthy event—an absolutely unnecessary and completely avoidable failure. On the other side of the Spectrum, let's say we're trying to figure out how to sell via Zoom in the early stages of the pandemic. Maybe we've never sold over Zoom before, and maybe our first several attempts go poorly. The fact we keep coming back, that we keep trying despite our repeated failures, is praiseworthy. In fact, it is our praiseworthy efforts to keep trying that will ultimately lead to positive change and the necessary transformation to win.

On Dr. Edmondson's Spectrum most of the reasons she lists for failure aren't of the blameworthy variety. In fact, most gravitate quickly toward praiseworthy. Specifically, she notes, "The wisdom of learning from failure is incontrovertible. Yet organizations that do it well are extraordinarily rare. This gap is not due to a lack of commitment to learning... The reason: Those managers were thinking about failure the wrong way." They do so because it's all they know: Fail and you'll be punished.

Our culture in American fighter squadrons is different.

In the flying business we learned early on that there was NO WAY we could get everything right the first, second, tenth, or perhaps even twenty-fifth time. We also learned the only way we could get to the level of performance, both expected and required, was through incremental progress, progress driven by the constant analysis of our decisions and resultant actions.

Fighter pilots are *expected* to fail, and fail we did. Repeatedly. Then we were taught to analyze and study our failures. Finally, we had to take action on what we thought we learned from our failures to improve future execution. We'd go back out, execute, and repeat. Over, and over, and over again.

Our instructors taught us to embrace the praiseworthy components of failure by modeling it through their behaviors. Our culture gave us the space to learn. The fighter squadron stressed the importance of constant learning and being intentional about analyzing our failures to maximize opportunities to grow. The fighter squadron gives us an impeccable model to replicate in business.

HOW WE DISCUSS FAILURE MATTERS TO OUR TEAM

Fighter pilots are incredibly self-critical. We beat ourselves up when we make mistakes. We instinctively feel disappointed any time our performance is less than perfect. It's part of what drives us.

When I was privileged to progress in my flying career to the point of leading others on complicated missions, I was hard on my teammates when we failed to achieve our objectives. I naturally over-emphasized mistakes and was very quick to make us all hang our heads in shame during our post-mission debriefs—the space where we analyzed our performance to learn. Early on in my evolution as a flight lead, I learned from one of my instructors that I was framing the conversation the wrong way.

After a particularly disastrous mission—one where we absolutely did not achieve mission success—I spent about three hours talking about how poorly we executed and how terribly we performed. I framed the discussion around the negative aspects. I made us all feel bad, even to the point of questioning whether we had it in us to do better in the future. This wasn't intentional; it was natural.

Once I finished berating us all for our collective deficiencies, my instructor pilot took over from me and summarized our performance as follows: “Do you realize we were two decisions away from victory today?”

He then spent a couple of minutes making sure I understood which decisions should have been made differently to enable our success. He finished by asking me if I felt confident I could make those decisions the next day. I assured him I did. He said, “Great. Now go win tomorrow!” And with that, his debrief was done.

By framing the conversation around the positive aspects of the mission— “Do you realize we were two decisions away from victory today?”—he made a positive and inspiring impact in a fraction of the time it took me to tear my team down. He also left me energized and confident that we'd have a much better outcome the next time around. And he was right. I'm proud to report that the next mission was indeed a success!

BEING ABLE TO EMBRACE FAILURE IS DEPENDENT UPON HOW VULNERABLE WE'RE ALLOWED TO BE.

It turns out the Air Force fighter squadron, specifically the way we learn from missions that don't go well, is grounded in a concept called Psychological Safety. Dr. Timothy Clark, author of the book *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety*, defines psychological safety as “an environment of rewarded vulnerability.” Vulnerability is further defined as “being able to admit to mistakes and weaknesses in a public setting”.

In fighter squadrons we learn from our earliest days as new pilots that we need to readily admit to our failures in order to learn quickly and improve in a dangerous and demanding work environment. It's part of the values and belief system of our tribe, and it's part of manifesting integrity in all we do. In the fighter squadron our reward for being consistently vulnerable is acceptance, guidance, and focused instruction. It's also the promise that we won't be penalized for trying our best and not getting it right the first, second, tenth, or twenty fifth time we attempt a new maneuver, tactic, or procedure.

The funny thing is I had never heard the term ‘psychological safety’ during my time in the Air Force. I came across it when I was reverse engineering why it is that fighter squadron teams are so consistently effective in such a demanding environment. A friend of mine—a consultant who was a couple of years ahead of me in his transition to the corporate training world—turned me on to the term and I began my study of it.

Dr. Clark noted that American fighter squadrons are among the most advanced practitioners of this concept. And it's our ability to embrace vulnerability, to champion those who readily admit to their faults in a team setting, that allows us to learn constantly and field teams that consistently win.

BEHAVE THE WAY YOU WANT YOUR TEAM TO FOLLOW

The only way we're going to get our teammates to buy in to the notion that failure is more positive than negative and is therefore our mechanism to improved performance is to model the behaviors we want them to adopt. We must practice what we preach. We must:

Learn to be vulnerable in front of our peers and subordinates.

Reward those who follow our lead.

Frame our discussions in a way that highlights the positive aspects of failure, rather than the negative.

Yes, leadership is situational. Yes, there are times we'll use a different approach. And no, not all failures are good. We must enforce standards, and we need to remove people from their jobs when they can't get where they need to be. But those are the easy things for us to do. The concept we are sharing here is much more difficult—and therefore offers us greater reward when it's done well.

EMBRACE FAILURE.

POINTS TO PONDER

- 3.1 What emotions does failure spark in you?
- 3.2 What does psychological safety mean to you?
- 3.3 How can you better embrace failure?



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Robert “Cujo” Teschner, retired Air Force fighter pilot, is the national bestselling author of *Debrief to Win: How America’s Top Guns Practice Accountable Leadership...and How You Can, Too!* He is a former F-15C “Eagle” instructor at the prestigious US Air Force Weapons School. He is also a former F-22 “Raptor” fighter squadron commander. Now he serves as the Founder and CEO of VMax Group, a St Louis-based international training company. In this capacity, Cujo is a highly sought-after motivational keynote speaker and corporate trainer. His expertise leading high-performance teams enables him to bring high-performance team training into businesses of all shapes and sizes, helping drive buy-in, engagement, and performance. Cujo and his wife, Diane, are blessed to be parents to five beautiful children.

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Kim “KC” Campbell is a retired Air Force Colonel who served in the Air Force for over 24 years as a fighter pilot and senior military leader. She has flown 1,800 hours in the A-10 Warthog, including more than 100 combat missions protecting troops on the ground in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As a senior leader, Kim has led hundreds of Airmen both at home and abroad in deployed locations. Most recently, Kim served as the Director,

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Daniel “FuZZ” Walker is a former combat-proven F-22 Raptor Mission Commander and is currently a Juris Doctor candidate at Harvard Law School. His academic, combat, and leadership experiences have enabled him to connect with and inspire diverse groups of people across the nation, to include a recent 60 Minutes feature story. Walker will be attending Harvard Law School as a Juris Doctor Candidate in the class of 2024. Daniel and his wife, Kelly, have two amazing children.

