



BY STAN POHMER

CELEBRATE...FAILURES?

Everyone has failures in business but you need to think about how you can make a failure into a celebration.

Celebrate your failures as well as your successes to find ways to differentiate your businesses and develop the potential of your team.

Celebrate failures...is Pohmer losing it again? Why would anyone want to consciously reward failure, unless they are not smart enough to tell the difference between failure and success...or are just looking for another opportunity to party hearty?

Traditional management thinking over the past 20 years or so has been to publicly celebrate success every chance you can — at team or company meetings, in press releases, at trade events, in consumer ads — sort of an “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative” mentality. In and of itself, this isn’t a bad strategy since people seize the opportunity to put a positive spin on everything, including their public personas. Sort of like being a Mr. Rogers, who never had a bad word to say about anyone or anything, living in a Utopian bubble where we’d all like to be.

And the HR gurus have strongly suggested that leaders should celebrate the successes of their team members whenever possible as a way to reward positive results and behavior, motivation for the repetition of this behavior in the future, a kind of Pavlovian approach to people management. And if others see a certain behavior being rewarded, the hope is that they will emulate those same behaviors so they will be recognized and rewarded. Plus, conventional thinking says that you always want to portray a positive and upbeat image to your employees as if nothing is wrong, or you run the risk of displaying a negative attitude, which can be perceived as being a negative motivator. As a result, we never publicly discuss or admit to our failures.

Creativity Wanted

On the surface, this sounds like a great idea, using rewards and celebration as a catalyst to motivating desired results from individuals and teams. And while there are some very powerful and beneficial reasons for this approach, there are also some limitations and concerns. For instance:

- If your employees know that you only reward successes, they become risk averse, not taking a chance at creating something new or thinking out of the box because they are worried it might not work and earn that pat on the back they’re conditioned to expect and desire. What you end up with are “safe” thinkers.

- There’s a tendency over time for the recognition to become marginalized, with the team leader looking for just about anything to reward. The whole process can be perceived as trivial without any real motivating incentive. You end up rewarding mediocrity.

- Being excessively success focused tends to lead to overanalysis, delaying or denying the implementation of new ideas for fear of failure.

Personally, I’m an advocate of using positive motivation and the reward recognition system to encourage certain behaviors...it sets a great tone in a work environment. However, I believe this process unto itself inhibits the creativity and quantum-leap thinking that is essential in today’s very competitive world. And this kind of thinking is one of the few things that will set your company apart from the rest and truly differentiates your business.

What’s really needed to foster breakthrough thinking and programs is a process that also rewards (and doesn’t penalize) attempts to

change and try new ideas, even if they don’t work out as originally planned. If we just stay in the safe zone, fearing reprisal for failure, we’re only serving to hinder the creation, development and implementation of new ideas. Ideally, we should be celebrating not only successes but failures.

Successful Failure

Granted, the 3M Company is a manufacturer and not a retailer, but the culture they’ve developed for innovation and the rewarding of successes as well as failures could be a great model for any company, including retailers. They have a commitment to innovation that allows their employees to devote up to 15 percent of their time to independent idea development of their own choice, not necessarily germane to their “assigned” research or job responsibilities.

Do all of the ideas they come up with work or have application to 3M’s business model? Absolutely not. But without encouraging this process and understanding and accepting the reality that the vast majority of the “free time” research won’t bear anything commercially viable, they wouldn’t have ever developed some products that have become industries unto themselves.

Take, for example, Post-It Notes; as prevalent as they’ve become in our society, they were never planned as a product. Someone in 3M’s research lab was trying to develop a new super adhesive, one stronger than what 3M already had on the market, but what he developed was actually weaker and stuck to objects but could be easily lifted off. Some would say it was a failed attempt. No one knew what to do with it

until another employee, tired of having paper markers fall out of his hymnal at church, decided to coat these markers with some of the weak adhesive he had heard about, the one that failed the original development criteria. And with that Post-It Notes were born and became one of the most popular office products ever developed.

The lesson to be learned from this example is that no one tried to hide the "failure," but rather shared it with others who ultimately found an application for the failure that resulted in turning the lemon into lemonade.

Determining Success

When I was leading my team at Target, we had our regular weekly team meetings where one of the agenda items was always talking about the successes of the week. Each team member in turn presented something...be it a project, an idea, a negotiation, an advertising circular, new signage or a product just developed...to the team and everyone applauded and reinforced the success of the individual's efforts. There were some questions asked, and I'm sure certain aspects of the success discussion were applied to things the other team members were working on. But, in too many cases, what resulted were incremental improvements, not radical or revolutionary improvements because this reward and recognition process embraced safe thinking, leading people to take minimal risk. And we all know that the greatest rewards also carry the greatest risks.

After one of these "success" discussions, I asked the team to individually tell us what they had tried that week that didn't work as anticipated or just plain failed. And, as you might expect, there was absolute dead silence in the room for what seemed like 10 minutes, because over time we had developed a culture that only rewarded success, not embracing the potential failure can provide; no one ever publicly discussed failures!

To break the silence, I presented one of my "failures" of the week (I had plenty to choose from!). Then we proceeded to discuss the why's and how's of the failure, with everyone contributing ideas on what could have been done to make it more successful or why the

approach I had taken with it caused it not to work. We turned the discussion of failure into a positive learning experience, with everyone benefiting from the process.

It took a while for everyone to feel comfortable sharing failures with the group, but as they gained confidence that this was a positive experience and they wouldn't be hung out to dry when discussing their failures, I began to see more willingness to try new and different things. New opportunities were explored and measured risk taking became more acceptable. Eventually, sharing failures became part of the group culture, and celebrating and learning from failures was equally as important as celebrating and learning from successes.

Accepting and embracing failure as part of the culture is as tough for the team leader to accept as it is for the employees, so you'll have to change the way you think for it to become comfortable for everyone else.

Encourage Risk Taking

I'm not suggesting you just let your team run wild with half-baked ideas and not hold them accountable for their failures. But you should encourage risk taking and accept the fact that everything won't always work; if they're not trying, they're not doing, and you'll never achieve the potential that's out there.

Give them the autonomy to test, pilot and propose a new strategy. Use the failures as a learning experience for the individual and the group; in many cases, someone else might have an idea during the sharing process that can turn the failure into a success. On the big things that require more investment, you should be part of the planning and review process to help minimize (not eliminate!) the risk.

I encourage you to celebrate your failures as well as your successes to find ways to differentiate your business and develop the potential of your team. Who knows, there might be a Post-It Note waiting for you to discover right there in front of your face, but you'll never know if you don't have the right culture to find it... ☘

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group, Minnetonka, Minn. He can be reached by phone at (952) 545-7943 or E-mail at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com.



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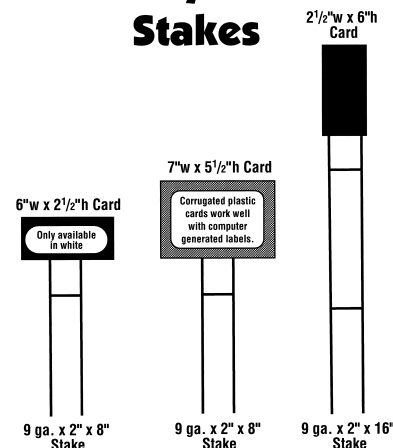
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