

The Leader's Leader—

Learning Not to Fear Failure

Organizations must learn to see failure as an investment in an education, rather than an expense.

by **Jack Lannom**

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One of the common problems I have encountered when consulting with new clients is that of an organization that has grown past the point where one individual can oversee its daily operations. Yet there remains one severely overworked entrepreneur, teetering precariously at the top of the organizational hierarchy, grimly plodding through a mind-numbing string of eighty and ninety-hour work weeks, trying desperately to give *some* attention to every area of operation and devoting sufficient attention to *none* of them. The organization is unwieldy and unresponsive because all authority still rests with that one frazzled and exhausted man or woman who doesn't dare take a vacation, lest the entire operation lurch to a sudden halt. Far too many leaders stubbornly refuse to delegate authority; they believe no one is competent to take responsibility.

These exhausted business owners, who long ago stopped “leading” and are now reactively racing from one hastily resolved crisis to the next, have forgotten how they themselves learned their jobs.

Long ago, someone took a chance and gave them opportunities to learn—and **opportunities to fail**. How many times have you heard a harried executive with huge dark circles under his or her eyes grumble, “If

you want it done right, you've just gotta do it yourself"? The phrase is a cliché. Yet that same leader was once given the opportunity to fall down and skin his or her professional knees... and to rise and walk some more.

Mary Kay Ash, who founded the enormously successful international cosmetics firm, Mary Kay Inc., has written, "Many times I have told the people in our organization, 'If we ever decide to compare knees, you're going to find that I have more scars than anyone else in the room. That's because I have fallen down and gotten up so many times in my life.'"¹ This remarkable leader, who has inspired and equipped hundreds of thousands of professional women, personifies the fearless attitude of the Leader's Leader—she welcomes failure as an invaluable ingredient for success.

If we learn from failure, we are growing.

One executive related a powerful illustration on the importance of failure to the authors of the fine management manual, *The Leadership Challenge*. The man explained how he strapped on a pair of skis for the very first time and headed out for instruction. He skied for the entire day without falling once, a feat he considered remarkable for a novice. The executive skied proudly over to his instructor and informed him of his accomplishment. The instructor's response was not quite what he had expected!

[The instructor] told me, "Personally, Urban, I think you had a lousy day."

I was stunned. "What do you mean, lousy day? I thought the objective was stand up on these boards, not fall down."

The ski instructor looked me straight in the eye and replied, "Urban, if you're not falling you're not learning."

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¹ Quoted from the Mary Kay website, www.marykay.com, "Life Lessons from Mary Kay," viewed 1/16/02.

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Jack Lannom is an internationally known speaker, author, and consultant. He has served as a corporate coach for several Fortune 500 companies, including Citibank, R&R Donnelly and Sons, Jefferson Pilot Communications, Caterpillar, and also Knight-Ridder Newspapers and is featured on the PBS television program, "Lannom Memory Methods".

Jack is the author of *Untapped Potential*, *Transformational Coaching*, *Quantum Mind*, *Memory Genius*, *The Self-Concept Game*, *The Leaders Leader*, *You Are A Genius Children's Interactive Software*, *Lannom's Memory Methods*, *People First*, and *The Dynamics of Remembering Names and Faces*.

He's also a talented athlete who holds black belts in six different styles of Kung Fu, including a tenth degree black sash in Wa Lu. And Jack holds the world record for breaking a 3,150-pound block of ice with a single blow from his hand!

To learn more about Jack Lannom, visit his website here: JackLannom.com where you can sign up for his free newsletter, learn more about his products and read the next 25 pages of *People First*.