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The Leader's Leader -

Collect Negative Knowledge Faster than Your Competitors

Organizations must reject the idea that failure is an expense and learn to see failure as an investment in an education.

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841 words | 4 pages

As a coach prepares a team to run in a competitive race, she understands that some of the most important lessons are derived from experiencing those failures which teach the team how *not* to win! A student athlete bangs her knee on a high hurdle and glances nervously over at her coach, expecting a disapproving frown. Instead, the coach's face is lit by a delighted smile, because her charge is *learning*! The coach has run this race before, she hit *her* knee in the very same way, and she gained the same important negative knowledge. The coach gives her charges permission to fail; indeed, she *expects* them to fail;

> ***She does not berate them when they do so, because she knows that the runners are learning priceless lessons that will equip them to become champions.***

The coach gathers her team together. "We're in a highly competitive league," she tells the group, "so I want you to fail *faster* than the competition. When someone in our group falls, we're going to huddle up and debrief. We'll ask each other, 'What did we learn from that?' We're going to celebrate what we've learned, and *that's* how we're going to win!"

The very same attitude prevails in the organization directed by a Leader's Leader. There are no emotional whips or baseball bats lying close at hand for beating staffers after a mistake. Just as the CEO did with the nervous junior executive [see last week's article, "See Failure as an Investment!"] and likewise the coach with her track team, the organization huddles up after a mistake—but not to assign blame and shame. The group calmly debriefs and accumulates priceless intellectual property that cannot be gained in any other way! And if the group is going to win *their* competitive race, they must accumulate that intellectual property faster than the competition!

A truly progressive organization will develop a formal system to spread the news of negative knowledge throughout the company quickly and efficiently. "Look here, staff," leaders will say, "these are the ways *not* to do it! We will only develop a thorough knowledge of the *best* business practices if we also possess negative knowledge of the worst ones.

> ***In order to know what we must do to succeed, we must also come to an agreement what we must not do!"***

Think of the freedom that is demonstrated by a child who is learning to ride a bicycle. When a father releases the bicycle and lets his son ride solo for the first time, the child's mind is busily engaged in problem solving and discovery. He is learning how to make the bike stay up, and, when he falls, how *not* to ride it as well. The child is totally free and uninhibited, because he has no fear of failure. And yet, at the same time, he is learning and stretching and challenging himself. He is fully human and fully alive, growing in strength and skill and knowledge, because he is holding nothing back.

Let me conclude with a question and a challenge for those of you who currently hold positions of leadership. I'm going to return to the preceding paragraph and alter the final three sentences slightly.

The men and women who work for me are totally free and uninhibited, because they have no fear of failure.

They are learning and stretching and challenging themselves. They are fully human and fully alive, growing in strength and skill and knowledge, because they are holding nothing back.

Can you read that statement and agree that it describes your workplace? If your honest answer is, “No, but I wish it did,” then join me next week! We’ll begin to see how to make this “stretch goal” a shining reality in the workplace.

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".

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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*.