

The Role of Risk Taking and Learning From Failure

Insights

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I wince whenever I see motivational posters with an eagle soaring over a mountain and a stirring phrase. That's not me. Cute phrases and motivational posters have limited effect on a guy who has handled 520 worker fatality cases and hundreds of internal investigations, union drives, and corporate campaigns. But Jere Bucholz' explanation of how NASA learns from failures was from the real world and motivated me. After the Challenger explosion, NASA could easily have shifted to a bureaucratic mode of always taking the safe course and spending time on justifying one's actions in the event that they are challenged. That CYA approach won't put men on Mars or attract and keep the talent necessary to meet that goal. I recently read a Wall Street Journal article about the highly regarded former Army General McCrystal. By all accounts, McCrystal was a superb battlefield general, but he became ensnared in an interview with the never-to-be-trusted Rolling Stone newspaper and had to resign. He's not a whiner and doesn't deny his actions. I can't imagine the pain a genuine warrior feels at leaving the army at his zenith, but McCrystal has moved on and developed a business career. So I respect his comments about failure:

We all need a reminder of the need to keep swinging even when we feel whipped ... and to learn from mistakes and reinvent ourselves.

I have much more respect for the Churchills of the world who erred and paid for their mistakes, and yet achieved great things, than for the person for whom everything has always gone well.

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