

Building Resilient Leaders

“Fear, failure and forging”

by Jason Boykin

Failing sucks. There is no sense in sugar coating it or lessening the effects it has on individuals and organizations. However, what history has shown us is that many of the most successful leaders have at some point failed. It may further come as a surprise to many that some of our most notable military leaders have failed and failed miserably. What sets these individuals apart from the rest of the world that faces failure on a daily basis? They, for a lack of a better term, embraced the suck or the failure. Contrary to popular belief, failure is not a singular event and that both the pre-and post-actions before a failure occurs can often be more important in building a resilient leader than the actual event. Failure is often attributed to the inability to face one’s fear of a tangible or intangible

>Jason Boykin’s current bio information was unavailable.

object. As a professional warfighting organization, we—the Department of the Navy—must wholly embrace the role fear has in leadership development, the significance of controlled and uncontrolled failure, and the continuous forging of our resilient leaders.

According to Eric Greitens in *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*, “He who fears he shall suffer, already suffers what he fears.”¹ Fear is and always will be a natural aspect of being human. Fear is defined

as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or harm.”² Fear—much like stress—is almost always present in our daily lives and can degrade our warfighting ability if we do not recognize, analyze, and learn from it. As leaders, we must not look at fear as something to be dismissed but instead embraced so that we can continue to temper our actions to said fear. These tempered actions are often compiled into three general categories, fight, flight, or freeze. If we as leaders fail to incorporate controlled failure exercises into the development of our warfighters, we will never witness their immediate actions to fear thus committing a grave injustice to ourselves, or warfighters, and the organization as a whole.

While onboard the USS *WASP* (LHD 1) in the spring of 2015, I learned first-hand how fear can factor into the decision-making process. As a newly promoted chief petty officer, I was given the opportunity and enormous responsibility of standing officer of the deck-in port (OOD). Although we often downplay our responsibilities in the military, watch standing is one aspect that can never be taken lightly, and as the officer of the deck, it does not matter how junior you are or what technical field you come from what matters is your ability to react efficiently and effectively. One morning while standing the 0700–1200 watch, often the most stressful of in port OOD watches, the ship experienced a catastrophic Class A mishap. At the time, the ship was taking on provisions in preparation for a future underway. Almost immediately upon assuming the watch, a fellow chief



USS WASP LHD-1. (Photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Taylor King.)

came running across the ship's brow and yelled for me to look at the pier. Immediately upon scrambling onto the pier, my view was directed to a massive outpouring of liquid that was arching from the side of the ship onto the pier. At that moment, I actually *did not* do what I was trained as per standard operating procedure, which called for the OOD to ring bells from the quarterdeck and announce flooding over the 1 MC. Instead, I ran to the outpouring on the pier, and at the same time, I called it away on the handheld radio I had been issued. Reflecting on it now my action was based solely on my fear for the safety of others. I feared that the liquid was fuel and wanted to physically verify that it was

ers.”³ As we train and lead our future Marines, we share our experiences so that transfer of wisdom will continue to occur and that they can reflect on their own fears. As leaders, we should not mask our failures in some vain attempt to boost our egos: “arrogance is the armor worn by hollow men.”⁴ We must not fear the capabilities of our subordinate leaders if we have trained and examined their actions. When we fail to train and inspect, we begin to assume capabilities and in doing so we place ourselves in a precarious position of dealing with unexpected catastrophic failure.

You will not succeed unless you are willing to fail.⁵ Sometimes, learning the hard way through failure is more

brought it to light. In reality, what was witnessed was a systemic failure to appropriately identify character and leadership weaknesses. Had the individual learned from smaller, less significant failures beforehand, they may have shown greater resiliency to the catastrophic event. In retired ADM William McRaven's book *Make Your Bed*, he speaks on a significant failure that he personally faced:

July 1983 was one of the tough moments. As I stood before the commanding officer, I thought my career as a Navy SEAL was over. I had just been relieved of my SEAL squadron, fired for trying to change the way my squadron was organized, trained and conducted missions. There were some magnificent officers and enlisted men in the organization, some of the most professional warriors I had ever been around. However, much of the culture was still rooted in the Vietnam era, and I thought it was time for a change. As I was to find out, change is never easy, particularly for the person in charge.⁶

ADM McRaven, one of the most instrumental naval leaders in present history, was fired and would go on to not only recover but eventually be an integral figure in the Osama Bin Laden raid. How does someone recover from that? What intangibles that are unseen went into the ability to bounce back from absolute failure? Therein lies the ultimate question and a significant character attribute that we look for in our leadership development. The rebuttal will be that no one was killed and no equipment was destroyed, so does it equate to an actual failure? The answer is yes! It was an actual failure—albeit controlled. History has also shown us uncontrolled failure and none other than another famous naval leader could showcase such a powerful failure:

One of the most celebrated officers in naval history very well might have been drummed out or pushed off the fast track to promotion in today's Navy. As an ensign, future five-star Adm. Chester Nimitz ran the USS Decatur aground in 1907 and was convicted at court-martial for endangering a ship. No one today disputes that

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not. Where I failed in this physical verification is that I tasted it. This was not my brightest moment in the Navy, but fortunately, it was not fuel nor sewage (thankfully)—it was seawater. Eventually, it was determined that a ballast tank had exploded as a result of over-pressurization. My watch team was found to have done everything in accordance with procedure, and we were not at fault nor were we responsible for the mechanical failure as it had occurred under the supervision of another department. The structural failure did showcase various gaps in our ability to react and effectively communicate; unfortunately, it took two million dollars and months of repairs to identify these gaps. The ballast tank explosion also did something vital for me as a resilient leader—it helped me to see my honest reaction to fear and further allowed me the opportunity to share my experience with future OODs so that they could learn from my success and failure. As Otto Von Bismarck once stated, “Any fool can learn from his mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of oth-

beneficial than learning the smart way; however, that is not to say that we should not try to become more intelligent, but we should also recognize the importance of hard learning. In our pursuit of excellence, we as an organization struggle with utilizing failure as a growth experience—and more often it becomes the beginning of a punishment. Clarification is needed here, as many will say that we should not build a mindset of accepting failure. I would wholly agree; however, we should look at ways of inducing controlled failure early and often in careers as it has a direct correlation with the resiliency of leaders. Many will go their entire careers with not so much as a perceived hiccup and then BAM! They are on the front page of a major publication, and we wonder what went wrong? A huge ethical or professional failure occurred, and everyone is surprised. The Navy and the Marine Corps are no strangers to these failures, but what we often do not recognize is that the failure had been occurring for months if not years before the significant event that

running a ship aground is a serious mistake—one that has damaged if not ended the careers of many a skipper. Fortunately, Nimitz’s superiors saw his worth. About three years after the incident, the Navy promoted him to lieutenant. Nimitz would go on to lead the World War II Pacific Fleet to victory against Japan. Assuming command two weeks after the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Nimitz rallied a Pacific Fleet short on ships and airplanes to halt the Japanese advance. His leadership in the decisive Battle of Midway, in which a numerically outgunned Pacific Fleet struck a lethal blow to the Japanese navy, has been considered the turning point of the Pacific war. However, several surface warfare officers said that the community’s current culture and promotion system has become so focused on risk aversion that junior officers aren’t being encouraged to take calculated risks and learn from their mistakes. “I think Admiral



ADM Chester Nimitz provides an example of resilience in the face of failure. (Official Navy portrait, National Portrait Gallery.)

as capable as they would prove to be. Do not look at it as *one and done* but much the same way steel is forged, we must allow our leaders to take the *beat and hits*. Where possible, allow them to strengthen themselves internally—thus strengthening our organization as a whole. Even when we bring ourselves to current events, the ramifications can be damaging as in the case of the Pa-

and earned some self-respect by then, the adult pain they meet probably won’t strengthen them. It will likely overwhelm them.”⁹ Do we need to run ships aground or take deaths in combat to build resiliency? Hopefully not, *but* if we plan to be successful in the asymmetrical world of warfare we live in today, we must foster an environment where early controlled failure can be introduced. We must forge our future by reflecting on our past as well as incorporating creative leadership development. Remember, “the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places,”¹⁰ don’t be afraid of the break you will be surprised by the mending process and how well it contributes to our goal of building resilient leaders.

Notes

1. Eric Greitens, *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life*, (Boston, MA: Mariner Book/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).
2. Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “Fear,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
3. *Resilience*.
4. *Ibid*.
5. John C. Maxwell, *The Complete 101 Collection*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 2012).
6. William H. McRaven, *Make Your Bed: Little Things that Can Change Your Life ... and Maybe the World*, (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2017).
7. Erik Slavin, “How Would Admiral Nimitz Have Been Dealt with in Today’s Navy?” *Stars and Stripes*, (May 2010), available at www.strips.com.
8. *Resilience*.
9. *Ibid*.
10. *Resilience*.

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Nimitz had the drive and ability to lead, and that meant commanding officers were more willing to protect him,” said Bill Shaw, a recently retired surface warfare lieutenant commander. “But in the end, I don’t think he’d make it under today’s promotion system.”⁷

Both McRaven (controlled) and Nimitz (uncontrolled) are perfect examples of the climb and forging from failure. In a time of limited resources and aging assets, we may not be able to give every leader a second chance, but we must be able to look at both the objective and subjective aspects of a failure and not make quick decisions based on the responses of outside entities. If we continue the path of slash-and-burn firing, then we will eventually have no one experienced to lead our organization into the future. Had these two individuals not experienced failure early they may not have been

cific Fleet. ADM Swift (Pacific Fleet) being passed over for promotion and subsequent early request for retirement is a perfect example of losing strategic leadership and the effects of subordinate uncontrolled failure. By ADM Swift being passed over for selection, the U.S. Pacific Command may go without a naval flag officer at the helm—a first since 1947!

According to Eric Greitens, “If you’re growing you’re likely failing. If you’re not failing, you’re likely not growing.”⁸ Resilience is often termed as the ability to bounce back from a hardship—much the same way a rubber band bounces back to normal form when it is stretched. The endurance of the stretch is important and to “learn resilience, children [or even leaders] must be exposed to hardship. If they don’t meet hardship early, they’ll certainly find it later. And if they haven’t built a habit of resilience

