

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE 21 IRREFUTABLE LAWS OF LEADERSHIP

JOHN C.
MAXWELL

FAILING FORWARD

TURNING MISTAKES *into*
STEPPING STONES *for* SUCCESS

Praise for *Failing Forward*

“Failure is the hallmark of success. Without failure there would be no great successes. John Maxwell reveals the secrets for turning everyday failures into the stepping-stones of achievement. With this book, you’ll never fear failure again!”

David W. Anderson

Founder and Chairman,
Famous Dave’s of America, Inc.

“All of us have experienced professional or personal failures in our lives. This book will encourage you to look at your failures as stepping-stones rather than stop signs. It will help you face your failures with faith and steer you away from dwelling on the facts that caused your failure.”

Anne Beiler

Founder, Auntie Anne’s
Hand-Rolled Soft Pretzels

“John Maxwell has once again written an incredible book, *Failing Forward*, to help us understand ourselves. Unfortunately, he paints all too clear a picture of how all too often we view failure in the wrong way. Through this book John encourages us to embrace failure and see the value of it in our lives instead of avoiding it. Through incredible stories and wonderful insight, John helps us to see the importance of failure as we proceed on the journey of life. Thanks for helping me see that no matter how difficult life is, “The key to overcoming . . . doesn’t lie in changing your circumstances. It’s in changing yourself.” With all the struggles I’ve faced in battling cancer and losing a career as a major-league baseball pitcher, thanks for helping me realize the value of *Failing Forward*.”

Dave Dravecky

Author, *Comeback*

“One of the greatest attributes of Dr. John Maxwell’s books is that they challenge you to grow as a person and reach your maximum potential. *Failing Forward* will inspire you to overcome whatever obstacles you are facing personally and professionally. After reading this book you will be highly motivated to encourage others and add value to their lives.”

Greg Horn

Owner, Payless Food Center,
Cynthiana, Kentucky

“Once again John Maxwell has hit a home run! Everything about this book resonates with me because every defining moment of my life has come as the result of adversity or failure. God has used what I thought were setbacks to push me forward in His plan for my life. John Maxwell is absolutely right: ‘Failure is a price we pay for success.’”

David Jeremiah
President, Turning Point

“In his warm and friendly style, John Maxwell teaches us that our failures and adversities can and should be used to help us ‘fail forward.’ This should become your handbook on how to make the most of your mistakes.”

Barbara Johnson
Author, *He’s Gonna Toot,*
and I’m Gonna Scoot

“*Failing Forward* offers fifteen practical steps to help you become the high achiever you were meant to be. I highly endorse these principles and procedures.”

Jack Kinder Jr.
Kinder Brothers International

“John Maxwell is a leader’s leader who knows what it takes to succeed. The fact that he’s devoted an entire book to the topic of failure is a testimony to how vital ‘failing forward’ is to both success and leadership.”

Peter Lowe
Success Strategist and CEO,
Peter Lowe International

“I highly recommend Dr. John C. Maxwell’s new book, *Failing Forward*, to anyone, regardless of their occupation. We all experience some form of failure, and Dr. Maxwell shows us how to deal with failures and turn them into successes. He also gives some real-life experiences of successful people to demonstrate how they handled situations by ‘failing forward.’ Great reading for anyone.”

Dan Reeves
Head Coach, Atlanta Falcons

“I have long been a believer in the value of treasure hunting trials. In *Failing Forward*, John Maxwell offers great insight on how to learn and grow from past failures.”

Gary Smalley

Author, *Making Love Last Forever*

“John Maxwell has written another classic on dealing with important life issues. *Failing Forward* is his best book yet, and that is saying a lot!”

Pat Williams

Co-Founder, Orlando Magic

“Really successful people fail many times. John Maxwell’s *Failing Forward* makes you realize what a regular part of life failure is. He convinces you that you can overcome it, and in the process teaches you how.”

Zig Ziglar

Author, *Over the Top*

FAILING FORWARD



TURNING MISTAKES *into*
STEPPING STONES *for* SUCCESS

John C. Maxwell



HARPERCOLLINS
LEADERSHIP

AN IMPRINT OF HARPERCOLLINS

This book is dedicated to
The INJOY Group,
men and women wholeheartedly
committed to the mission of
helping others learn how
to fail forward.

© 2000 by John C. Maxwell

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by HarperCollins Leadership, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

The Scripture quotation noted NKJV is from THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION. © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The Scripture quotation noted NIV is from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maxwell, John C., 1947–

Failing forward : turning mistakes into stepping-stones for success / John C. Maxwell.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN: 978-0-7852-7430-8 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-7852-6815-4 (ie)

ISBN: 978-0-7852-8857-2 (tp)

Epub Edition July 2020 9781418508326

1. Success—Psychological aspects. 2. Self-actualization—Case studies. 3. Success in business—Case studies. 4. Failure (Psychology) I. Title.

BF637.S8 M3416 2000

158.1—dc21

99-059267
CIP

Printed in the United States of America.

09 10 11 12 13 RRD 18 17 16 15 14

Information about External Hyperlinks in this ebook

Please note that the endnotes in this ebook may contain hyperlinks to external websites as part of bibliographic citations. These hyperlinks have not been activated by the publisher, who cannot verify the accuracy of these links beyond the date of publication

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the wonderful people who helped me create this book:

Charlie Wetzel, my writer

Linda Eggers, my executive assistant

Brent Cole, my research assistant

Stephanie Wetzel, my proofreader

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Preface: Becoming a REAL Success

1. What's the Main Difference Between People Who Achieve and People Who Are Average?

Redefining *Failure* and *Success*

2. Get a New Definition of *Failure* and *Success*
3. If You've Failed, Are You a Failure?
4. You're Too Old to Cry, but It Hurts Too Much to Laugh
5. Find the Exit Off the Failure Freeway

Do You Mind Changing Your Mind?

6. No Matter What Happens to You, Failure Is an Inside Job
7. Is the Past Holding Your Life Hostage?
8. Who Is This Person Making These Mistakes?
9. Get Over Yourself—Everyone Else Has

Embracing Failure As a Friend

10. Grasp the Positive Benefits of Negative Experiences
11. Take a Risk—There's No Other Way to Fail Forward
12. Make Failure Your Best Friend

Increasing Your Odds for Success

- 13. Avoid the Top Ten Reasons People Fail
- 14. The Little Difference Between Failure and Success Makes a Big Difference
- 15. It's What You Do After You Get Back Up That Counts
- 16. Now You're Ready to Fail Forward

Notes

About the Author

Preface

Becoming a REAL Success

As I speak around the country, people often ask me why I write books. I've been asked that question so many times that I want to give you the answer before you begin reading the first chapter of *Failing Forward*.

I have dedicated my life to adding value to people. It's the reason I teach conferences, record lessons on cassette, create training videos, and write books. It's the reason I lead my organization, The INJOY Group. I want to see people achieve. I want to see each person I meet become a REAL success.

I believe that to succeed, a person needs only four things. You can remember them by thinking of the word *REAL*.

Relationships: The greatest skill needed for success is the ability to get along with other people. It impacts every aspect of a person's life. Your relationships make you or they break you.

Equipping: One of the most significant lessons I've learned is that those closest to you determine the level of your success. If your dreams are great, you achieve them only with a team.

Attitude: People's attitudes determine how they approach life day to day. Your attitude, more than your aptitude, will determine your altitude.

Leadership: Everything rises and falls on leadership. If you desire to lift the lid on your personal effectiveness, the only way to do it is to increase your leadership skills.

If you pick up any one of my books, you can be sure that it seeks to add value in one of these four areas. I've written this particular book to change

your *attitude* about failure. Read it, absorb it, and allow it to help you turn your mistakes into stepping-stones for success. My desire is that *Failing Forward* will add value to your life.

1

What's the Main Difference Between People Who Achieve and People Who Are Average?

We are all failures—at least, all the best of us are.

—J. M. BARRIE

What makes achievers excel? Why do some people skyrocket while others plummet? You know what I'm talking about. You can call it luck, blessing, or the Midas touch—call it whatever you want. But the truth is that some people just seem to achieve incredible things in spite of tremendous difficulties: They finish in the top 5 percent in nationwide sales for their company after losing key accounts. They find ingenious ways to increase profits for their department in the face of budget cuts. They earn a graduate degree while raising two children as a single parent. They discover awesome business opportunities while colleagues don't see any at all. Or they recruit winner after winner into their organization despite what looks like an anemic labor pool. It doesn't matter what kind of work they do. Wherever they are, they just seem to make things happen.

Certainly all people like to think of themselves as above average. But achievers seem to leave “average” in the dust—so far behind them that ordinary seems a distant memory.

WHAT'S THE ROOT OF ACHIEVEMENT?

What makes the difference? Why do some people achieve so much? Is it . . .

- Family background? Having a good family growing up is something to be grateful for, but it's not a reliable indicator of achievement. High percentages of successful people come from broken homes.
- Wealth? No, some of the greatest achievers come from households of average to below-average means. Wealth is no indicator of high achievement, and poverty is no guarantee of low achievement.
- Opportunity? You know, opportunity is a peculiar thing. Two people with similar gifts, talents, and resources can look at a situation, and one person will see tremendous opportunity while the other sees nothing. Opportunity is in the eye of the beholder.
- High morals? I wish that were the key, but it's not. I've known people with high integrity who achieve little. And I've known scoundrels who are high producers. Haven't you?
- The absence of hardship? For every achiever who has avoided tragedy, there's a Helen Keller who overcame extreme disabilities or a Viktor Frankl who survived absolute horrors. So that's not it either.

No, none of these things are the key. When it comes right down to it, I know of only one factor that separates those who consistently shine from those who don't: *The difference between average people and achieving people is their perception of and response to failure.* Nothing else has the same kind of impact on people's ability to achieve and to accomplish whatever their minds and hearts desire.

WHAT YOU NEVER LEARNED IN SCHOOL

Soccer player Kyle Rote Jr. remarked, "There is no doubt in my mind that there are many ways to be a winner, but there is really only one way to be a loser and that is to fail and not look beyond the failure." How people see failure and deal with it—whether they possess the ability to look beyond it and keep achieving—impacts *every aspect* of their lives. Yet that ability seems difficult to acquire. Most people don't know where to start looking to get it.

***There is no doubt in my mind that
there are many ways to be a winner,
but there is really only one way to be
a loser and that is to fail and not
look beyond the failure.***

—KYLE ROTE JR.

Even positive people have a tough time learning how to see failure positively. For example, I'm known to be a very positive person. (My book *The Winning Attitude* has been in print for more than fifteen years.) But I haven't always been good at failing forward. I wasn't properly prepared for it. It's certainly not something they tried to teach me in school. And kids today don't get it there either. In fact, the school environment often reinforces people's worst feelings and expectations about failure.

Take a look at some of my previous attitudes toward failure, and see if your experience was similar:

1. *I feared failure.* An experience I had in college, along with my response to it, is typical of what many students encounter. On the first day of class when I was a freshman, the professor walked into my history of civilization class and boldly declared, "Half of you in this room will not pass this class."

What was my first response? Fear! Up to that time, I had never failed a class. And I did not want to start failing all of a sudden. So the first question I asked myself was, *What does the professor want?* School became a game that I wanted to win.

I recall that I once memorized eighty-three dates for a test in that class because my teacher believed that if you could cite the dates, you had mastered the material. I got an A on the test, but three days later, I had forgotten all of the information. I managed to avoid the failure I had feared, but I had not really accomplished anything.

2. *I misunderstood failure.* What is failure? As a child, I thought it was a percentage. Sixty-nine and lower meant failure. Seventy and above signified success. That thinking didn't help me. Failure isn't a percentage or a test. It's not a single event. It's a process.

3. *I was unprepared for failure.* When I graduated from college with my bachelor's degree, I finished in the top 5 percent of my class. It didn't mean

a thing. I had played the school game successfully, and I had absorbed a lot of information. But I wasn't at all prepared for what was ahead of me.

I found that out in my first job. As the pastor in a small rural church, I worked very hard that first year. I did everything the people might expect of me and then some. But to be honest, I was as concerned about getting everyone to like me as I was with helping people.

In the type of church I led, each year the people voted to decide whether to allow the leader to keep his job. And many of the leaders I knew over the years loved to brag about the unanimous affirming votes they received from their people. My expectations were high as I prepared to receive my first unanimous vote. Imagine my surprise when the votes came back 31 yeses, 1 no, and 1 abstention. I was devastated.

After I went home that night, I called my father, who was a veteran pastor, former district superintendent in the denomination, and college president.

"Dad," I lamented, "I can't believe it. I worked so hard for those people. I've done everything I can." I was at the point of tears. "Somebody actually voted against me and wanted me to leave the church! And an abstention is as good as a no. Should I leave and go to another church?"

To my shock, I heard laughter on the other end of the phone.

"No, son, stay there," my dad said as he chuckled. "That's probably the best vote you'll ever receive."

A NEW COURSE

At that moment I realized what an unrealistic view I had of success and failure. If anything, my college experience had reinforced the wrong notions I had about failure. And as I've helped leaders to grow and develop through the years, I've seen that most people are in the same boat.

In *Leadership Magazine*, J. Wallace Hamilton states, "The increase of suicides, alcoholics, and even some forms of nervous breakdowns is evidence that many people are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success; poverty is more prevalent than wealth; and disappointment more normal than arrival."

***People are training for success when
they should be training for failure.
Failure is far more common than
success; poverty is more prevalent
than wealth; and disappointment
more normal than arrival.***

—J. WALLACE HAMILTON

Training for failure! That is a great concept, and it's the idea that prompted me to write this book. Right now you are getting the chance to sign up with me for a class you were never offered in school. I want to help you train for failure. I want you to learn how to confidently look the prospect of failure in the eye and move forward anyway. Because in life, the question is not *if* you will have problems, but *how* you are going to deal with your problems. Are you going to fail forward or backward?

PUTTING A NEW FACE ON OBSTACLES

When I think of people who were able to look trouble in the eye and forge ahead, one of the first who comes to mind is Mary Kay Ash. She has built quite an organization. During the last four or five years, I've had many opportunities to speak to the people in her cosmetics company about leadership. In fact, as I travel around the country doing conferences and seminars, it seems that no matter where I speak, there are always at least a dozen Mary Kay consultants in attendance.

I admire Mary Kay. She overcame a lot of obstacles in her career, and she never let failure get the better of her. Mary Kay's first career was in direct sales, and she was quite successful. But she also found that it was difficult for a woman to progress in the corporate world, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s—even after twenty-five years of success. She says,

I had worked my way up to being a member of the board of the company I was with only to find that, even though our sales force was made up entirely of women, governed by an all male board, my opinions were of no value. I constantly heard, "Mary Kay, you are thinking like a woman again!" I felt rejection in the worst form. So I decided to retire.¹

Her retirement didn't last long. By the time a month passed, she was stir-crazy. She was ready to start her own business. If she was going to encounter obstacles, they would be there only because she brought them on herself. She decided on a cosmetics business that would give every woman who worked in it unlimited opportunities. She purchased the formulas to the best beauty products she'd ever found, worked up a marketing plan, and prepared to set up a corporation.

TROUBLE!

It didn't take long for her to hit her first obstacle. When she visited her attorney to make legal arrangements for the corporation, he insulted her and predicted her failure. "Mary Kay," he said, "if you are going to throw away your life savings, why don't you just go directly to the trash can? It will be so much easier than what you are proposing." Her accountant spoke to her in similar terms.

Despite their attempts to discourage her, she moved ahead. She sank her \$5,000 life savings into her new business—every cent she had. She put her husband in charge of the administrative side of things as she worked feverishly to prepare the products, design the packaging, write the training materials, and recruit consultants. They were making wonderful progress. But then a month before she was to open for business, her husband died of a heart attack right at their kitchen table.

Most people would never have been able to go on after that. They would have accepted defeat and faded away. But not Mary Kay. She kept going, and on September 13, 1963, she launched her business. Today, the company has more than \$1 billion in annual sales, employs 3,500 people, and empowers 500,000 direct-sales consultants in 29 markets worldwide.² And Mary Kay Ash has received just about every award an entrepreneur could dream of. Despite adverse circumstances, obstacles, and hardships, she failed forward.

THE IMPOSSIBLE QUESTION

When I was growing up, one of the questions I used to hear from motivational speakers was this: "If the possibility of failure were erased,

what would you attempt to achieve?”

If your perception of and response to failure were changed, what would you attempt to achieve?

That seemed to me to be an intriguing question. At the time it prompted me to look ahead to life’s possibilities. But then one day I realized that it was really a bad question. Why? Because it takes a person’s thinking down the wrong track. There is no achievement without failure. To even imply that it might be possible gives people the wrong impression. So here’s a better question: If your perception of and response to failure were changed, what would you attempt to achieve?

I don’t know what obstacles you are facing in your life right now. But whatever they are doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is that your life can change if you’re willing to look at failure differently. You have the potential to overcome any problems, mistakes, or misfortunes. All you have to do is learn to fail forward. If you are ready to do that, turn the page and let’s go!

Your First Step to Failing Forward:

Realize There Is One Major Difference Between Average People and Achieving People

Look at the way any achiever approaches negative experiences, and you can learn a lot about how to fail forward. Read through these two lists, and determine which one describes your approach to failure:

Failing Backward

- Blaming Others
- Repeating the Same Mistakes
- Expecting Never to Fail Again

Failing Forward

- Taking Responsibility
- Learning from Each Mistake
- Knowing Failure Is a Part of Progress

- Expecting to Continually Fail
- Accepting Tradition Blindly
- Being Limited by Past Mistakes
- Thinking *I am a Failure*
- Quitting
- Maintaining a Positive Attitude
- Challenging Outdated Assumptions
- Taking New Risks
- Believing Something Didn't Work
- Persevering

Think about a recent setback you experienced. How did you respond? No matter how difficult your problems were, the key to overcoming them doesn't lie in changing your circumstances. It's in changing yourself. That in itself is a process, and it begins with a desire to be teachable. If you're willing to do that, then you'll be able to handle failure. From this moment on, make a commitment to do whatever it takes to fail forward.

Step to Failing Forward:

1. Realize there is one major difference between average people and achieving people.