

## The Benefits of Failure

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago I was working with a distinguished law firm partner who had been given a few months to find a [new job](#) by his existing firm. The partner had not looked for a job in probably twenty-five-plus years and I think his confidence was shaken by losing his job. The attorney was quite marketable and was used to earning close to a \$1 million a year, and I knew that he would not have a very difficult time getting another job.

I met with him on several occasions and gave him a list of about fifteen good-sized law firms around Los Angeles that I thought I should approach to engage in discussion with him. I was pretty confident that most of the law firms would be happy to speak with him, and I was also confident that he would be able to get offers from at least half of those. I had been careful to arrange a good mix of firms for him—some were a “stretch” for him (meaning he probably would not get even an interview), others I knew he would be likely to get an interview with, and a few were “back-ups”—thrown into the mix because I wanted to make sure he got a job no matter what happened.

The attorney was desperate for a job and would be unemployed within weeks. He was so stunned by getting fired that he had waited several weeks before he approached me to start [looking for a job](#). Nevertheless, I knew he would come out fine.

After reviewing my list and spending some time thinking about it, he came back to me and said the only law firm he wanted to approach was the least prestigious, lowest-paying law firm on the list. I did not argue with him and contacted the firm. The firm could not believe its luck that an attorney of his stature was interested in working for them. Within six or seven days he had an offer from the firm paying around \$300,000 a year—making him one of the highest-paid attorneys in the small law firm.

After he got this offer I tried to encourage him to at least speak with some of the more prestigious law firms in town. Many of these law firms would be capable of offering him a salary of four times what he had been offered by the small law firm. Moreover, these law firms had bigger clients and more diversified practices, and I was confident that he was better suited to working in one of these law firms.

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The attorney then said something to me I will never forget: “*I am not going to approach those firms and fail. I have a new job now and why should I humiliate myself and risk failing approaching firms I might not get a job with.*”

What the attorney was saying was that he was afraid of failing. He was taking the path of least resistance in his job search and rather than risk failure, he was choosing to do nothing at all. Given how well known this attorney was—and how distinguished his career had been to date—I was amazed that he feared rejection so much. Because he was afraid of exposing himself to failure, he ended up with a much less prestigious and lower-paying job than he would have otherwise. In essence, he was settling for less than what he was capable of because he did not want to fail.

I am not sure what he was worried about. Was he worried that some attorney might say, “We interviewed him and did not hire him”? Is knowing this remark was never uttered something that was worth \$750,000 a year in lost income over the course of the rest of his career? I do not know. I think it might have been.

I do not think there is anything wrong with fearing failure—but this fear can also imprison us instead of helping us. Many people are literally paralyzed by their fear of failing and, consequently, they end up doing nothing. The more times you fail, the more opportunities you have to succeed.

I am always so surprised when I speak with **job seekers** who apply to a new job maybe every few weeks—despite being unemployed. When you speak to people who are being miserly with their applications, you generally find that they say things like they do not want to “spam” employers with too many applications, only want to apply to the jobs that are a “good fit”—and so forth. Really, though, what is going on is that these people are afraid of being rejected. Each rejection hurts a little, so rather than face rejection, they do nothing at all.

When a young child first starts learning how to walk, she spends months falling down before she is able to take her first steps. Imagine if the first time a child tried to walk and failed people around her said “it’s useless!” and gave up on her.

The idea of giving up on a baby trying to walk—even after 1,000 attempts—sounds ludicrous. Each time a baby makes another attempt at walking, his legs get a little bit stronger and his balance gets a little better. As time passes, the baby starts to develop more and more confidence and eventually is able to walk.

When it comes to children learning to walk, we expect them to fail for months on end until they finally master it. In addition, when toddlers are learning to walk we encourage them and cheer them on. We generally do not make fun of toddlers and scold them for trying. Nor does the child lose confidence. Eventually, the child learns to walk.

If success after massive and prolonged failure is something that we have all experienced growing up, why is it that we become so afraid of failure later in life?

In life, there really is no such thing as failure. There is only feedback. Many people avoid countless activities because they are terrified of failure. If you do not take action because you are afraid of failure, you will achieve only a fraction of what you are capable of achieving in your life. Not trying at all because you are afraid of failure is an even bigger failure than trying something and not succeeding.

With very few exceptions, the most successful people in the world experienced continual failure until they became successful. In fact, very few people ever reach any form of noteworthy success in any endeavor without consistent failure. What these people do differently from others is use failure to inspire them to try harder and change their approach.

Many people know what it takes to be successful. They can point to various tasks that need to be done on a consistent basis in order to achieve success. However, knowing what it takes to be successful and taking action are two different things. To get a job, you need to apply for the job. To meet new people, you need to get out. Every time you put yourself on the line you risk failing. The real strength comes from risking failure and taking action. I am sure you know people who know they should change their lives, know how they can change their lives, and they still do not do it. Most often it is fear of failure that is preventing them from taking action and following through. The ability to manage your emotions so you do not fear failure is incredibly important. The ultimate failure is not trying because you are afraid to fail.

## Famous Failures



**Barbara Walters** was told to “stay out of television” in 1957 by a well-known producer.



**Jack Benny** was expelled from high school.



**Marlon Brando** was expelled from military school.



**Jules Verne** wrote a play at age 16 and gathered friends and family together to read his work to them. The audience's unexpected laughter prompted Verne to stop reading after the first act and later burn the script. He later wrote: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*.



**Clint Eastwood** was fired by Universal studios after his first two movies for not speaking fast enough.





**Ulysses S. Grant** failed as a real estate agent, farmer, US Customs official, and clerk in a store before becoming a general and later president.

**Burt Reynolds's** first TV series was canceled after one season. He then appeared as a bachelor on the dating game and was never picked.

**The Beatles** were rejected in 1962 by five record labels.

**George Lucas's** first film flopped in 1971, prompting every major studio to turn down his next movie, *American Graffiti*.

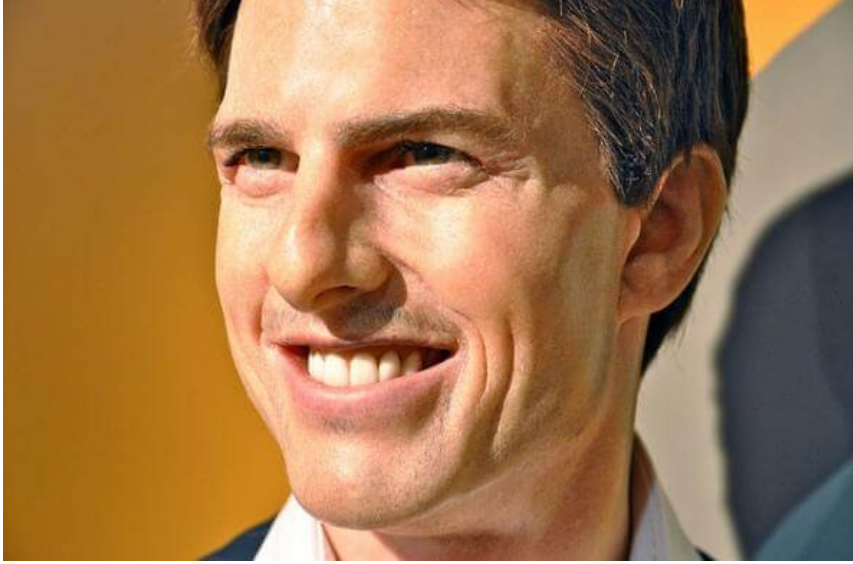
**Michael Jordan** didn't make his high school basketball team. He was later named the greatest athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by ESPN.



**Marilyn Monroe** was dropped in 1947 by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox after one year under contract because production chief Darryl Zanuck thought she was unattractive.

**Dr. Seuss's** first book was rejected by twenty-seven publishers and Seuss considered burning the manuscript. The eventual publisher sold 6 million copies.

**Barbra Streisand's** Broadway debut opened and closed on the same night.



**Tom Cruise** was rejected for a role on the TV show *Fame* because he was not “pretty enough.”

**Orville Wright** was expelled from the sixth grade for mischievous behavior.



**Christopher Columbus** miscalculated the size of the globe and the width of the Atlantic Ocean and wound up discovering the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas (which he believed to be an island of the Indies), Cuba (which he thought be a part of China), and the Dominican Republic (which he also mistook as part of the Far East).



**Sylvester Stallone** was thrown out of fourteen schools in eleven years. His professors at the University of Miami discouraged him from a [career in acting](#). Stallone was also rejected for roles in the movies *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Serpico*, and *The Godfather*. His screenplay for *Rocky* was also rejected by all but one company, who insisted that if they bought it, he would not act in it.

**Billy Joel**, embarrassed by his first album, *Cold Spring Harbor*, spent six months playing bar piano in the lounge of the Executive Room in Los Angeles under the pseudonym Bill Martin.

**Rock Hudson** required thirty-eight takes to successfully execute one line in his first movie.

After being dropped by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox after six mediocre movies, **Humphrey Bogart** was fired from a job reading radio playlets for laxatives. He then earned a living playing chess for fifty cents a round.

**Dr. Ruth Westheimer** never completed high school, had two failed marriages, and worked as a housemaid.

**Sigmund Freud's** first book only sold six hundred copies and earned him \$250 in royalties.

**Walt Disney's** first cartoon production company went bankrupt.

In 1977, **Cyndi Lauper** was told she would never sing again. She won a Grammy in 1984.

**Myrna Loy** failed her first screen test. She later became Hollywood's number one female box-office attraction.

**Elvis Presley's** music teacher at L. C. Humes High School in Memphis gave him a C and told him he couldn't sing.

**Jay Leno** failed an employment test at Woolworth's.

**Billy Crystal** was cut from the cast of *Saturday Night Live* before the show ever premiered.

**Betty Grable** was told by a ballet teacher to give up the idea of ever becoming a dancer. She later became one of the most beloved dancers in Hollywood.

**Lucille Ball** was told that she had no talent and should go home from Murray Anderson's drama school. Failing to get into any Broadway chorus lines, she worked as a waitress and soda jerk.

**William Goldman** was fired after writing his first screenplay. He went on to win two Academy Awards for Best Screenplay.

**John Keats's** first book of poetry in 1817 was a financial failure.

**Van Halen's** first demo tape was rejected by every major record label.



**John F. Kennedy** lost the election to be president of his freshman class at Harvard. He failed to win a post on the student council as a sophomore and dropped out of Stanford Business School.



**Thomas Edison** was fired from his job working in a telegraph office after one of his experiments exploded.

**Dustin Hoffman**, after failing to work as an actor in New York, worked as a janitor and an attendant in a mental ward.



**Katie Couric** was banned from reading news reports on the air by the president of CNN because of her irritating, high-pitched, squeaky voice.

**Steve McQueen** was fired from his first role, where he had to say only one line, after just four days. He later became the highest-paid actor of the 1960s and 1970s.

**Ruth Bader Ginsburg** received no **job offers** when she graduated from law school. She now serves on the US Supreme Court.

**Mick Jagger** was deemed “unsuitable” by the BBC to sing on the radio in 1962.

**Bachman Turner Overdrive** was rejected by twenty-four record companies.

**F. W. Woolworth’s** first store failed. Later he created the Woolworth empire of stores around the world.

**Fred Smith** received a C on a project at Yale where he outlined a plan for reliable overnight delivery service. He later founded Federal Express based on the same idea.

**Jerry Lewis** had to repeat fifth grade and was expelled from high school.

**Steven Spielberg’s** mediocre grades prevented him from getting accepted to UCLA film school.

**John Cheever** was expelled from high school after failing French, Latin, and Math. He later won a Pulitzer prize.

The Sex Pistols’ first single was dropped by EMI and their second single was banned by the BBC.

**John Grisham’s** first novel was rejected by sixteen agents and a dozen publishers. He later wrote *The Pelican Brief*, *The Client*, and *The Firm*, which were all best sellers and were made into movies.

**Richard Pryor** was expelled from high school.

During the first year, Coca-Cola sold only 400 Cokes.

During his first three years in the automobile business, **Henry Ford** went bankrupt twice.

**R. H. Macy** failed seven times before his store in New York caught on.

Novelist **John Creasey** got 753 rejection slips before he published the first of his 564 books.

**Thomas Edison** was thrown out of school in the early grades when the teachers decided he could not do the work.

President **Harry S Truman** went broke in the men’s clothing store business he started.

**Bob Dylan** was booed off the stage at his high school talent show.

**Thomas Edison** tried more than 2,000 experiments before he was able to get his light bulb to work.

**Chester Carlson** took his invention to twenty big corporations in the 1940s. After years of rejections, he was able to persuade Haloid, a small Rochester, NY, company, to purchase the rights to his electrostatic paper-copying process. Haloid became the Xerox corporation.

**General Douglas MacArthur** was denied admission to West Point twice.

**Buddy Holly** was fired from the Decca record label in 1956 by Paul Cohen, who referred to him as “the biggest no-talent I ever worked with.”

Academy Award-winning writer, producer, and director **Woody Allen** failed motion picture production at New York University and City College of New York. He also flunked English at NYU.

**Wilma Rudolph** was born prematurely. At age 4, her survival was in doubt because of scarlet fever and double pneumonia. She was left with a paralyzed leg and told she would never walk again. She later won three gold medals in Olympic track-and-field competitions.

**Glenn Cunningham** suffered such severe burns when he was 5 years old that doctors told him he would never walk again. In 1934, he set the world record for the mile.

**Washington Roebling** suffered severe brain damage and only had use of his index finger. This didn’t prevent him from building the Brooklyn Bridge.

**Albert Einstein** didn’t start speaking until he was 4 years old.

**Claude Monet** had horrible cataracts. Fortunately he still became one of the world’s greatest painters.

**Winston Churchill** had a stuttering problem as a child. He later became one of the world’s most respected public speakers.

**Ludwig von Beethoven** was deaf when he wrote some of his best music. Most people wouldn’t think a deaf person could succeed in music.

**J. S. Bach** was the fourth choice for the job of Kapellmeister at Thomaskirche in Leipzig, Germany.

**Rudyard Kipling** submitted a story to a California newspaper in 1888. The editor replied, “I’m sorry, Mr. Kipling, you just don’t know how to use the English language.” He later won the 1907 Nobel Prize for Literature.

**Randy Travis** was rejected by every major record label twice.

**Robert M. Pirsig** received 121 rejection slips before *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was published. It sold 3 million copies.

**John Huston’s** screenplay for *Treasure of Sierra Madre* elicited the following review from Warner Brothers: “I don’t think you’d be missing anything to pass this up. It’s a draggy tale, unrelieved by either comedy or practical colorful incident. . . . I think we should leave this alone.” That screenplay won the Academy Award for Best Screenplay.

**Woody Allen’s** screenplay *Annie Hall* was called a “chaotic collection of bits and pieces that seemed to defy continuity” by a prominent Hollywood film editor. The screenplay later won four Academy Awards.

**Babe Ruth** holds the major league record for most career strikeouts.

**Walter Payton** never made it to a Division I school to play college football. He later became the NFL’s career rushing yardage leader.

**Jerry Rice** never made it to a Division I school to play college football. He later became the NFL’s career leader in several receiving categories.

In his first twenty years of business, **Tom Monaghan** went broke twice, lost control of his pizza company, and was sued for

trademark violations. His pizza company went on to become Domino's pizza.

Luciano Pavarotti could not read music. He has become one of the leading tenors in the world and still has trouble reading music!

### **THE LESSON**

Most people are afraid of exposing themselves to failure, and therefore settle for less than what they want or are capable of achieving. Failure to take action due to your fear is itself the biggest failure of all; few people ever reach any degree of success without consistent failure. You must use failure as an inspiration to try harder in the future, and manage your emotions so as not to fear failure and let that fear preclude action.

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