

## Daily Oopsies & the Cycle of Failure

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So, we want to start by acknowledging that we perceive the intended purpose of this edition of *Essentials* was to look at one large fail and how you learned from it. However, we've never really been the type of people that follow the rules. Plus, we think it's important to acknowledge that failures happen *all the time*.

What if we told you there is a key (or cycle) to failure? And what if we told you there was a way to unlock your potential and see failure as an opportunity for success in everything you do? We believe there is a failsafe way (pardon the pun) to progress through stages of self-discovery to tap into a failure, shifting it to better understand our learning process. For us, this starts with the concept of vulnerability.

### Vulnerability

When you think about the meaning of being vulnerable it is no wonder as to why we as human beings avoid it as an experience. To be vulnerable means to be open to attack and criticism, or to be susceptible to being hurt or wounded. As a general reaction for survival, we avoid painful experiences. However, thanks to the work from scholars like Dr. Brene Brown, we are coming to understand the importance behind embracing vulnerability and welcoming it into our lives. Now, to be vulnerable is more akin to being open, receptive, and adaptable. While still scary, it is no longer viewed as a weakness but rather a courageous step in connecting with others.

**Kate Steiner (KS):** I wasn't vulnerable. It was the first or second year as a campus-based FSA, and I had a student offer me some feedback after she had attended an IFC meeting that I was not at as the advisor. It was hard to hear, and my defenses went out of control. I lashed back at her instead of listening, and the result was a student in tears and me left feeling like an ass. After a short time, I apologized for my behavior, but our relationship was never the same. I had violated the trust we had built that led her to feel safe enough to offer me the feedback in the first place. Now, when offered challenging feedback, I see her face and take a moment to pause before reacting. That interaction reminds me to slow down and honor the human being that is in front of me.

**Dan Faill (DF):** A couple of years ago, I was serving on a campus committee on authenticity in the workplace, which was created to identify how people could be their full, authentic selves at work. As it turns out, it came from a place of people feeling like they could not

make mistakes or be vulnerable. Staff members felt they needed to embody a whitewashed version of “effortless perfection” in order to fit in. But staff members who are unwilling to fail often maintain the status quo.

### **Creativity**

Vulnerability unlocks creativity. Think about a time when felt at your most creative; what did your environment look like? Chances are it was during a bit of down time. Some scientists believe we are at our most creative when we are experiencing boredom. Or at least, not as “busy” as we all claim to be. To actually have free time in our day rather than running from meeting to event to class to meeting. To be bored also means to be vulnerable. Often instead of sitting in those moments we whip out our smartphones to resolve those feelings as quickly as possible. To be alone with our thoughts is an exercise in vulnerability, but it is also when we best tap into our creativity.

**KS:** I “wrote” most of my last two chapters of my dissertation in the shower ... well, sort of. You see this was the place where I made several connections regarding my data and where the idea for the model I developed first formed. Then later where the model was refined. Being removed from the computer and my phone, I was alone with my thoughts. This was and continues to be a time that I experience my best thought sparks. These sparks when honored with passion create the fire of innovation.

### **Passion (Innovation)**

Creativity ignites passion. Creative thoughts can be an open door to our subconscious. Our subconscious is a place of unspoken ideas, wants, needs, and passions. These very thoughts may go unspoken because we are afraid of rejection or failure. But think back to a time when you were encouraged to be creative. Think about how much energy and enthusiasm you had for your ideas. That spark of creativity ignites the passion for innovative thoughts and ideas.

### **Failure**

Not every creative idea ends in success. When we invite passion, we invite failure. However, they do not have to be mutually exclusive. People who pursue their passions do so relentlessly. Passion pursuits are about the journey, and these paths include points of failure. Think of a goal you recently accomplished, as you took steps toward that end result did everything go perfectly? Were there times of setback or frustration? Did you question why you kept going? The little voice inside your head that encourages you to try just one more time was driven by your passion. You will try things you are passionate about. And you will fail at some of them. The point is that you tried at all.

**DF:** Who we are on a daily basis can't change. That includes the mistakes we make and feeling comfortable enough in our environments to own those mistakes. One time, during Panhellenic primary recruitment, I completely screwed up one of the rounds of recruitment results, but I didn't realize it until after we pulled all the PNMs together to give them their next round of chapter events. Luckily, we caught the mistake minutes before sending PNMs on their merry way. I owned the massive mistake, gave context as to why I made the mistake, and then spent the next three hours reentering PNM preference information before triple checking the results. Did it set our schedule back a lot? Yes. Did it frustrate everyone in the process? Yes. Did I fail? You betcha. But I also quickly learned from that failure.

### **Learning**

Picture the process of change as an upward winding path that looks like a spring or a cyclone. As you travel upward on your path, you will have points of failure and with each point of failure comes an opportunity to learn. While it may feel like a set-back each time, when you look at the overall path you can see how far you have actually traveled. Good leaders will promote experimentation; it is through these experiences you can recognize and analyze what can go wrong. Each failure is actually the process of learning. Learning unlocks vulnerability (completing the cycle/unlocking all the keys). When you consider the process of learning as taking missteps until you find the right one, you must employ the use of vulnerability. You have to be open to being wrong or, at the very least, recognize there may be a better way. When people try new things, rarely do they get it perfect the first time. Learning something new takes practice and that practice can be a continual lesson in being vulnerable.

**KS:** He said I dropped some of the spinning plates. I was in an interim role, doing both the jobs of fraternity/sorority advisor and assistant dean. Toward the end of the year, in reviewing how things went, my supervisor told me that while I dropped a few of the plates along the way, they all bounced and nothing was broken. Believing that I managed the dual roles better, it was hard to hear. At first, I wanted to launch into an explanation on the reason that some of the plates were dropped. I wanted it to be someone else's fault. But the fault rested with me in that I still needed to learn how to manage my time as an administrator and better prioritize projects. After some self-reflection, I could agree that I failed along the way, but each failure came with professional growth.

## Safety

Central to this process is the importance of psychological safety. Psychological safety is the belief that you will not be punished for making a mistake. It is important in teamwork and individual processing. Studies have shown that psychological safety promotes creative thought, moderate risk taking, and sharing of opinions. This occurs when people have supportive and trusting relationships. Who do you consider to be a member of your safety net? These are the people that you are comfortable in showing your true self to, without fear of negative consequences. They cheer for you and challenge you, and they are an important role in creating change for yourself.

Too often we stop our journey before we start. We make up excuses on why we should not try a new way of doing something. We look at our calendar and list of tasks and just do the same thing as last year because we avoid failure or don't want to take the risk to try something different. Or worse, we have ideas for improving events and programming, but we're afraid others won't support us or we will fail in the long run. In short, we get stuck somewhere along the cycle. Fraternities and sororities, while grounded in tradition, have continued to thrive because we do not settle for what was always done. We adapt, we change, and we shift how we operate to move with the changing landscape of higher education. As leaders in our fraternal movement, the question for you is: Are you willing to fail if it means unlocking your community's or organization's potential?

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*Dr. Kate Steiner joined the Radford University campus in June 2018 as the director of fraternity and sorority life. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in family consumer sciences from the University of Wyoming, a Master of Student Affairs and College Counseling degree from Idaho State University, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in counselor education and supervision from the University of Wyoming. Her doctoral work focused on career longevity in the field of fraternity/sorority advising, career wellness, and burn out prevention. She has worked in the professions of student affairs and fraternity/sorority advising for the past 15 years. She is currently a lead facilitator for CAMPUSPEAK working directly with the Interactive Workshops, Leadership Plunge, and Building New Leaders. She holds a number of volunteer leadership positions most recently including the director of educational programming for the student leadership conferences for the Association of Fraternal Leadership and Values, as an education volunteer for her sorority, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and as the assistant editor of Oracle: The Research Journal for the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors.*

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*the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and he traveled as a leadership and education consultant after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree. After traveling, he attended University of the Pacific and received his Master of Arts degree. He then worked in higher education at University of the Pacific, Loyola Marymount University, Elon University, and UCLA serving as the fraternity/sorority advisor in most of those capacities. Dan is now a full-time coach, consultant, and speaker with CAMPUSPEAK, engaging students and communities on topics such as the intersection of alcohol and consent, leadership, and masculinity in an effort to encourage them to be brave enough to have the conversations that matter. He served on the AFA Foundation board of directors for two years and currently serves as a Critical Conversations facilitator for Pi Beta Phi Fraternity for Women. He enjoys whatever free time he has spending it with his two children who also live in Los Angeles, mostly dreading serving as a referee for his daughter's soccer team because he knows squat about sports.*