

How Executives Fail

26 Surefire Recipes
for
Failing as an Executive

Lee Thayer

Author of
Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing

WME BOOKS
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Windsor Media Enterprises, LLC
Rochester, New York
USA

*How Executives Fail:
26 Surefire Recipes for Failing as an Executive*

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ISBN-10: 1-934229-00-8
ISBN-13: 978-1-934229-00-2

Editor: Yvonne DiVita
Cover Design: Karin Marlett Choi
Page Layout/Design: Tom Collins

Published by:
WME Books
Windsor Media Enterprises, LLC
Rochester, New York
USA

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Praise for *How Executives Fail*:

“Habit is a great deadener and this book will help you break the ones that could fatally end your career (and ambitions!). The best ‘insurance’ book on leadership I’ve read.”

– Warren Bennis,
Distinguished Professor of Business,
University of Southern California,
Author of *On Becoming a Leader*

“Every few centuries, in every field of study, someone arises whose insights dwarf those of his or her peers. Lee Thayer is one of them. His work and his name will be remembered for centuries to come. As Einstein eclipsed Newton, Thayer eclipses Machiavelli. His seminal thinking on leadership is the foundation for all that I have done at Johnsonville Sausage.”

– Ralph C. Stayer, CEO
Johnsonville Sausage

“With characteristic insight, Lee Thayer tells us there are two ways to succeed: ‘get lucky and avoid failure.’ (Absolutely brilliant!) Since you can’t learn luck, Thayer offers his readers a baker’s two dozen ways to ‘fail on purpose’ in this original, funny, and useful little gem of a book. Smart executives will sneak peeks at its *ironically* practical pages when no one is looking.”

– James O’Toole, author of
Creating the Good Life

“In my work with top executives, I have come into contact with the many hundreds of books about leadership published in the last 30 years – and with the many hundreds of executives who look to that outpouring for some reliable ways of improving their skills and their organizations. From that view, Lee Thayer’s book, *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*, is the best damn book on leadership there is. Now, in his inimitable way, he has turned the “how-to-succeed” literature on its head. Behind the humor and irony of *How Executives Fail*, you will uncover the most provocative and practical voice in leadership today. Thayer teases us solidly onto the path of superior and sustainable performance by revealing how most executives fail. What a coup!”

– Pat Murray, President
J. P. Murray and Associates

More praise for *How Executives Fail*:

“Attracted by his (often) counter-intuitive but extremely practical ideas, I invited Lee Thayer a few years ago to be my on-demand coach and mentor. The fabulous successes we have been experiencing at Phillips Corporation are in large measure a result of his guidance. His unique perspectives in *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing* have been our compass. In his newest and most provocative book, *How Leaders Fail: 26 Surefire Recipes for Failing as an Executive*, he turns conventional wisdoms on their head. My advice? Don’t even think about attempting high-performance leadership without first studying the writings of the master.”

– Alan M. Phillips, President,
Phillips Corporation

“Once again Lee Thayer has challenged CEOs to step up and think outside the box. The supreme master of counter-intuition, he beckons leaders to confront themselves. Thayer is high-performance leadership’s modern day Yoda. No other book is needed (and I surveyed – ugh! – 5,000 or so of the best of them) to understand leadership competency and organizational effectiveness than Thayer’s earlier book, *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*. Now comes Dr. Thayer’s latest gift to CEOs and key executives: *How Executives Fail: 26 Surefire Recipes for Failing as an Executive*. There is no set of ideas on leadership more profound, no executive competency more revealed, no recipes for results more useful than Lee Thayer’s latest illumination of what really counts for leaders who want to make a dent in the Universe.”

– Michael W. Norris,
Senior Chairman,
Vistage (The World’s Largest CEO Membership Organization)

“When I assumed the role of CEO at HarrisInteractive I wanted to make our company a “great” organization, an organization that benefits all of its stakeholders. Lee Thayer’s powerful book, *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*, convinced me we needed his experience and expertise to fully realize our goals. Lee now works with us regularly, making a profound difference in attitudes and performance throughout the organization. He’s coached us, challenged us, and has made us believe that we truly can become the best in this business by creating sustainable excellence in every aspect of our Company. His new book, *How Executives Fail*, is vintage Thayer – a unique voice in an overcrowded space, full of tongue-in-cheek humor, cautionary tales and ironic twists – all the while being deadly serious. If you’re a leader who, like me, is determined to create a great organization, this book will help you to avoid ... failing.”

– Gregory T. Novak, past-CEO
HarrisInteractive, Inc.

More praise for *How Executives Fail*:

“As an ex-CEO, I am now devoted to helping CEOs achieve a better life, at work and at home. There is no comparable resource, in my opinion, than Lee Thayer – whether in his writings (e.g., *Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing*) or in front of the participants in our seminars and workshops. He understands high-performance organizations, and the leader’s role in making it happen in a more practical way than anyone else. Our members love him. His latest, *How Executives Fail*, is a stunning achievement – full of intrigue, innuendo, good humor and just plain inescapable facts about executive life. You’ll want a copy for everyone on your staff, and for your peers.”

– Bruce W. Peters,
Founder of CEOHQ Fellows
and Co-Founder of PeerHQ

*It takes some people all their lives
to become failures, while others
achieve it in just a few years.*

– American folklore

Irony: *“a state of affairs or an event
that seems deliberately contrary
to what one expects
and is often amusing as a result.”*

– The New Oxford American Dictionary

*“How many people are trapped
in their everyday habits:
part numb, part frightened, part indifferent?
To have a better life we must
keep choosing how we’re living.”*

– Albert Einstein

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[This book is not composed of chapters that continue on from the previous. It consists of short pieces – 5 to 8 pages – that I call “recipes.” These can be read one at a time profitably – by choice or by happenstance. These annotated titles will provide the reader with all the clues needed to get into and gain from the book, and are largely self-explanatory.]

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Overview

For all those who would presume to manage a human enterprise, there are two ways of succeeding: One is to get lucky. The other is to avoid failing.

It may seem perverse, but there are also two ways of failing:

One is to follow one's peers lemming-like down the slippery slope of mediocrity.

The other is to be oblivious to what part of the problem you are.

What is common to *all* situations is not the likelihood of success, but the likelihood of failure. The everyday rate of any real success on the part of managers and executives seems to bear no correlation to the exponential flood of advice about "how to succeed."

This little book of recipes about how to fail as a manager or executive turns that flood of advice about how to succeed on its head. The indispensable factor is not a list of explanations about how somebody succeeded. The indispensable factor is simply that of avoiding failure – avoiding the kind of thinking and actions that make failure likely.

There isn't a manager alive who couldn't use this book to advantage.

Hardly anyone sets out to fail. But most managers and executives do fail. They fail their own hopes and aspirations, if not their roles. How do they *do* this? By the time they figure out by trial and error what part of the problem they are, it's usually too late.

This little book is the only instruction book you'll ever need about how to avoid failing by default. You'll learn how to fail on purpose, with dash and aplomb. You'll meet many familiar people - people you will immediately recognize – in these pages. Here and there, you might catch a glimpse of yourself.

Think of it as failure therapy. What you can't learn here about your personal talents for failing you'll just have to learn the hard way. By failing. If you don't have insight into how executives fail, you're likely to end up there.

Enjoy this small book of collected wisdom about how to fail. Each "recipe" is drawn from universals of real life – how most managers and executives have failed in spite of their best intentions.

By Way of An Introduction

*“How can we fail
when we’re so sincere?”*

– Charlie Brown

Just so you will know ... I have walked in the shoes of those executives and wannabes who may find the ironic stance of this book not only entertaining but useful. In addition to functioning as an executive/CEO, I have worked and consulted with people in that role for just under five decades. I have conducted seminars for many, many hundreds of them on this planet.

I have been a trusted consultant to a wide range of executives in every industry and of every size. And I have partnered with them as a coach in developing their leadership in order to make truly high-performance organizations. They are therefore my friends, my peers, my fellow travelers.

I do not malign them by taking the position that most CEOs will *fail*. Most *will* fail – minimally, their own expectations, if nothing else. They will fall short of their own hopes and dreams.

At the end, they will not be ecstatic about their lives on earth. Many will live in frustration and they will die in frustration, because they will not have achieved what they envisioned when they were young, or when they first took over their role as executive or CEO. They may exhibit outward bravado. They may take on all of the trappings of success by accumulating the stuff that signals success in our society – wealth, material things, and a way of walking and talking as if superior to those who have accumulated less.

Now, what does it mean to be holding a book of recipes about “how-to” *fail*?

Consider the following:

- More than 10,000 books about how to succeed as a manager or an executive have been published in the past couple of decades. And this doesn’t count the many more thousands of seminars on “how to succeed.” All this effort and all this expenditure does not seem to have changed the rate of failure.

So the perverse logic is this: If you can study how to succeed and still manage to fail, maybe you could study how managers and executives have failed and thereby get some clues about how at least to avoid failing in the ways they did.

- There are few books at Amazon.com about how to fail. This, in spite of the fact that most managers and executives do fail. Where are they learning how to do this? Up

to now, they've had to learn it on the street. With *How Executives Fail* you can look into their executive offices, and learn for yourself how they failed. In order that you may – masterfully – fail, if you so wish. With intent and aplomb. Or, perhaps you can appreciate the irony of coming at it this way. And thus learn not so much how to succeed, but how to avoid failing. At least how to avoid failing in the ways so many of your predecessors and your contemporaries have. Or will.

- We all know that others will not consider an executive especially sane if he or she sets out to fail. Still, most will fail. Mediocrity is not the same as excelling. Maybe it's only a mild form of failure. Some have failed spectacularly, as the business press tells us. But most just sort of fizzled out along the way. We don't hear much about them. Where or what is the black hole that sucked them into mediocrity against their will and their intentions?
- Here's a puzzling fact. Executives who fail are more likely to be avid consumers of the flood of literature on "how to succeed" than are those few who actually do succeed. So, is it not ironic that they may be getting plenty of advice from the business press about how to fail? All that "how to succeed" advice is cleverly packaged to seduce the unwary into thinking they could succeed if only they bought the next great book or the next seminar promoting the latest or most popular panacea. Billions are spent every year on executive education. Days and weeks are lost, while executives "train" to be better than they are. But all of our problems have not gone away, have they?
- Here is what's truly ironic. People seem to be infinitely creative about how to fail. Maybe they didn't pick it up from a guru. But keep in mind that the sale of that guru's next book depends not upon the success of the readers, but on their failures. After all, if the book succeeded, and the readers succeeded, these gurus would be out of a job, wouldn't they?
- Finally, it's plain wrong for thousands of managers and executives to spend many billions to collect the currently-fashionable ideas about how to succeed when most of them are going to fail anyway. Doesn't it make sense to make use of the principles that have contributed to their failure – to reveal the secrets of how they failed?

None of these people, on whom so much of our future depends, *wants* to fail. Or in the case of this book, wants to learn how to fail. So my theme in this book is not really how to "fail." My expectation, rather, is that by taking this tongue-in-cheek approach, by assuming a posture of irony, a great many useful ideas about how to actually *avoid* failing might emerge.

Not one of the leaders I have worked with has, to my knowledge, aimed for mediocrity. And yet many ended up there. The fall into mediocrity is surely not to be counted as any form of success. And since being mediocre was not their aim in life, it seems fair to assume that, in that sense, they have failed – because they did not fulfill their own purposes, their

own hopes and dreams, in life. Many of those who failed, or will fail, do so as a result of contributing unintentionally to their own failure, either because of their own personal dragons (following bad advice, making bad choices/decisions), or simply as a result of their personal but ultimately wrongheaded ways of thinking and of doing things.

After decades of direct in-the-trenches experience, that's what I concluded. Maybe those few who have succeeded were just plain lucky. And maybe the bulk of those who have failed were just plain unlucky. But check out the logic here. If there is an ever-growing flood of books, lectures, seminars, etc., purporting to tell you how to succeed without being lucky, then maybe there should be this one book that provides you with tried-and-true recipes for how to fail without stumbling along waiting for Lady Luck to deal you a lousy hand.

This book reveals many secrets about how to fail. If you want to be a celebrity failure, this book tells you how to do it, purposefully and with flair. You won't have to struggle and waste time learning via the grapevine how to fail, or by imitating a role model. Here are the key insider tips and secrets you need to fail strategically, rather than embarrassingly, by default. If you want to know how so many of your peers contributed to their own failure in their role as an executive, read on. If you want to expose yourself to an *ironic* but still very *serious* twist on how you might actually achieve more of your hopes and dreams as an executive, read on for sure.

If you are looking for the pitfalls that make failures (or, perhaps, mediocrities) out of otherwise smart and ambitious people, then this book is for you. I have revealed the common denominators of how the majority of managers and executives succeed in failing. Maybe, cleverly, you could make use of the revelations offered ... and avoid the failure train so many of your colleagues and peers are on.

One last note: The sequence of each of these little recipes for how to fail is not important. You could open the book at any page and find something useful to you, since failure, like success, is such an individual thing. And, since it probably takes as much luck to fail as it does to succeed, I wish you "Good Luck" in finding yourself – or your future – in these pages. So put your thinking cap on backwards and put a twinkle in your eye. Take a bite here and there, but always with that frame of mind that enables you to make the most of it for your purposes.

At the very least, enjoy this perverse approach!

Lee Thayer
Flat Rock, NC, USA
June, 2009

Recipe #1

How to Breed Failure from Success

Most managers and executives who fail ... do so without really trying. If you are going to outdo them, you've got to try. You've got to think – really THINK – about the lessons for failure to be learned, and practice them daily.

We're talking about intention here: focused, deliberate, and strategic. So, if you intend to fail on purpose – which is the only way you can take credit for it – here are a couple of basic lessons.

First lesson: If you understand – really understand – how even a small success in your life, if taken as a formula for your success today or tomorrow, can actually lead to your eventual failure, you could be more intentional about failing.

Think about it. Most people who experience some small success at anything will concoct a kind of “theory” about how they succeeded and then they'll apply that “theory” again and again. When it begins not to work, they'll blame the world. You can almost hear them thinking, “... can't be me. I was successful before by doing things this way.”

The lesson is this: Make up a creative explanation of how you happened to be successful, and stick to it. If you want to fail, be persistent in creating and nurturing your own “success paradigm.” You'll get there, far ahead of others, and far more efficiently. That's one of the basic lessons to be derived from thousands of executive failures.

Do they change their “success paradigm” when it no longer works? Nope, they try to change the world around them. And when the world doesn't change to their satisfaction, they rail at it.

Children do this, and we're amused. They get furious with the sock if they can't get it on. Seasoned executives do this all the time. They get angry when the world doesn't work the way they believe it should. No one finds their antics very amusing.

Here's lesson two on how to breed failure from success: Most people like to pretend that any success that comes their way is due to them. But, if they don't succeed ... well, they have a larder full of excuses and explanations.

While they attribute *any* success to themselves, these same people will attempt to attribute their failures to anyone or anything they can “sell” to others. This is kind of the crux of the matter if you think about it.

Let's say that when you were a youngster you were rough-housing with a friend and broke a lamp in the house. Your mother was likely upset about it. She would stand over you, finger pointing in your face and ask, “Roscoe, did you do this?” You were probably thinking, “I wonder what kind of convincing story I can tell her about how this happened,

an explanation that makes me an innocent bystander?” What she’ll buy, you will likely try to sell.

Adults get to be really good at this because they’ve had a lifetime of practice. Yet, if you got an “A” on your report card, you wouldn’t blame this on your pal in class or on the teacher, would you? You’d take credit for it. Maybe neither one was your “fault,” neither the lamp nor the “A,” but over the years you come to see yourself as the sole cause of things that get others’ approval, and innocent of any outcomes that might get their disapproval.

When you’ve got that down, you are ready to get “a job.” Once you have a job, and you become really good at using your own theories of success, you’ll likely get promoted. After all, we want our managers and executives to be omniscient – to make good things happen – and it is okay for them to take credit for all of it. At the same time, we want them to be able to explain away any bad things that happen as not their fault. Keep in mind that your superiors are better at this game than you are, so they’ll blame you for their failures. Move up so you can do this too. That’s a common practice that actually gets rewarded.

The better you are at this, the “better” you will fail. It may take others years to fail, but you’ve decided to do so on purpose. So, why put it off?

There’s a Catch 22 here, of course. After all, who would believe you if you credited yourself for failures, but credited others (or conditions like “the economy”) for successes? That would be much closer to the truth of the matter, but who would believe you? That’s not the way celebrity success stories are purveyed by the media. The most popular ones are the “overnight” successes – who gain fame and fortune just for being “talented”! You play it the way it’s played, and thus become blind to how failure – and success – actually happen.

Given this way of thinking:

- Since you cannot readily imagine that you are part of the cause of your failure, you never learn anything about what part of the problem you may have been. As Alan Cooper put it in his book, *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*, “The unfortunate side effect of not understanding failure is the silent admission that success is not predictable – that luck and happenstance rule the ... world.” [*Emphasis mine.*]
- And, since you are confident that you are invariably the main cause of your success, you never learn what you need to learn about the other factors that have always played a role in any successes you may have had.

It’s a way of stupidifying yourself in order to facilitate your failure. It’s very common. In the end, if you consciously practice it, you can fail on purpose, surpassing all those others who fail by default.

History has proven that your peers have a very poor understanding of success and failure. Everyone is doing the “right” thing until the lights actually go out. If you can’t get down

to reality, you will be equally victimized by both your successes and your failures, just as they are.

Here's a role model for failure:

Hal was a go-getter from the git-go. He came into the company eager to blow everyone else away. So he got promoted on the basis of his enthusiasm, as often happens. He had some reasonable successes early on. Thinking that this meant he was superior to others, and that he therefore had the key to success, he continued to apply his very own "success paradigm" in every new situation that emerged. It hadn't occurred to him that luck and other people had played major roles in his early successes. His success paradigm was the real truth, to Hal.

He became arrogantly out of touch. The more he tried to apply the "secrets" of success from his earlier days, the more he failed. Because he blamed everything and everyone else for his increasing failures, and because he could only see himself, alone, as the cause of his success, he continued to fail. This did not affect his job, of course. He was kept around by people who shared his mind-set. At age 54, he had already been "out to pasture" for a couple of years. He was still hanging out there, but no one paid him any heed. To the younger managers, he was a joke. To his superiors, a nuisance. To himself, a victim.

There's a moral in there. If you can't find it, being victimized by your own "success paradigm" is almost assured.

Here's a hint: People see the world in terms of their explanations of it, their explanations being, for them, reality. So, a little success goes a long way. Even a small success goes to one's head. We want to relive it, over and over again. We cling to it, like a child clings to her magical, comforting blanket. Try taking that ragged old blanket away from her and see what happens – the little angel will turn into a ferocious "devil"! That's the way failing executives cling to their "theories."

People cling to the "theory" of success as they've created it. And reject the possibility of any culpability for their failures. So they never really understand either one. That's how failure gets bred from success. Way to go! You can make it work for you if you simply practice taking credit for any success you may have, but blame others or blame "circumstances" for your failures.

William James once wrote to H. G. Wells about "the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS."

Could he have meant "mental flabbiness" as well? "Success" often does function like a "bitch-goddess." Have you noticed?

Every “motivational” speaker or writer in the Western world can tell you how to make success out of failure. There’s a multi-billion-dollar industry devoted to it. And why are these books and seminars a growth industry, even in bad times? Because they don’t work. So the same people need to attend the next one, buy the next book, be “true believers” in the magic of “success.” Something like “Success for Dummies.” Or, as Evan Esar, writer and humorist, put it:

“Nothing succeeds like success, and nothing fails like reading a book on how to attain it.”

That’s because writers of those “Secrets of Success” books sitting on everyone’s desk this week are writing about how to make *success out of failure*. Something he or she couldn’t do in real life, so they decided to write a book about it (see #6, “How to Maintain your Gullibility”). As in, “those who cannot *do*, teach.”

Those books that contain hundreds of success paradigms which executives carry around like trusty six-shooters will eventually start shooting blanks. The executives will be going through the motions, but the motions will no longer fit the facts. The theory or paradigm will have been warped to fit the executives’ needs, not the realities of a changing world.

So cling to your success paradigm no matter what. Failure will eventually be the product. Guaranteed.

Let me share an old but useful story:

A drunk lost the keys to his car. A kindly passer-by asked him, “Where did you lose your keys?”

“Over there,” the drunk replied, pointing to a dark alley.

“Then why are you looking for them over here?” the passer-by asked.

“Because,” the drunk replied, “the light is better over here under the streetlight.”

The executive who is destined to fail wields his “success paradigm” like that streetlight. As if enchanted by the beam of light cast by a long-ago bit of success, he expects that tiny beam of light, always growing dimmer, to illuminate every situation he will face. He provides evidence of the old adage, “Nothing breeds failure like success.”

Why? Because success brings complacency. And complacency brings failure.

That, friend, is how you, too, can breed failure out of success. Little by little, but with certainty, your success paradigm will breed every problem common to failing managers and executives – every problem but success.

W. C. Fields had some advice for failure:

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There’s no use being a damn fool about it.”

It takes a long time for most people to realize they have failed. But it isn’t “cool” to fail just like everyone else does. Let your own unique success paradigm do it for you – and, instead of being like most others – cut to the chase.

Failing on purpose is noble failure. Failing by default is the clod’s way out.

Recipe #2

How to “Achieve” Mediocrity

The notion that mediocrity is “achieved” surely brought a smile, or a smirk, to your face. Most people do achieve mediocrity. Few intended to achieve it. Fewer still had a strategy for doing so. Therefore, the competition for failing in this way is fierce. As the old adage goes, “The pursuit of mediocrity is always successful.” So you’re up against almost certain success by others. And they won’t even be trying!

Mediocrity seems to function in (modern) society a bit like gravity. It does its best work when you give it no heed. Very much a “going with the flow” kind of thing. It’s all downstream. All you have to do is let go. Like earth’s gravity, it will pull you in with no effort on your part.

If you want to escape that destination, you have to muster something like escape velocity. You have to overcome the fantastic forces of mediocrity that prevail in everyday life, in order merely to avoid it and thus to fail on your own terms.

But wait. This is not about escaping from what is for most people the *inevitability* of mediocrity. This is about how to get there faster and more efficiently – that is, intentionally. And keep in mind that becoming mediocre is something that almost everyone you know (and some you don’t) can help you achieve. If you did want to succeed, instead of lolling around in mediocrity, you would suffer not only being alone in your quest, but you would suffer the derision of the majority – who speak from the strength of numbers. The question is, how can you get there – to the depth of mediocrity – before they do?

An elusive lesson may come from the French playwright Beaumarchais who, in his play, *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784), said,

“If you are mediocre and you grovel, you shall succeed.”

I say, avoid groveling. Wear your mediocrity like a cloak of honor. Be arrogant in your mediocrity. Be superior, celebrate! Let people suffer the ruthlessness of your determination to be mediocre! You have to be *more* mediocre than your thousands of competitors. *More* mediocre than your colleagues, than your family, more mediocre than your friends. This means avoiding any success that might come from apologizing in any way for your mediocrity. Be the one-eyed king in the kingdom of blind people.

For many years in Australian business circles, the implicit code of your mates was that outperforming them was okay only if it happened by accident. But if you were trying to become excellent on purpose, you would be scorned (the “tall poppy” syndrome – a metaphor for cutting off at the knees people who intended to be better than you are). Did the Australian business community get this from us? There is increasing evidence of that attitude in America, especially within organizations that are themselves mediocre.

Avoid the scorn of success. Be no more ambitious than the next fellow. And, if some success does come your way, be embarrassed by the way it happened upon you in spite of your best intentions ... to be a “good mate.”

Marie was a modest lady. She was very bright, more capable even, than some of the fellow employees in her department. Even than some of her superiors in the organization. But she deferred to them, something she somehow learned growing up. She wanted to avoid rocking the boat in any way. She wanted to be as invisible and anonymous as possible, never to be the source of controversy or the center of attention. Her immediate boss liked her for her attitude of silent servitude, because he was just like her. You know, getting along with everyone. They were both well-liked by their peers. They both failed, together, as the company slowly slipped into oblivion.

The lesson? She had no *strategy* for failing. Nor did the company. Shameful.

To fail by default – for example, by being mediocre – is even more embarrassing than succeeding by default, i.e., by luck. If you’re going to do it, do it with great fanfare and enthusiastic intention. Otherwise you won’t get credit for it. And what kind of life would that be?

D’Israeli wrote:

“...it is a wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us.”

Well, how wrong could he be? In a democracy, taste lies with the majority of people. And if people in such overwhelming numbers are gratified by their mediocrity, who is he to pretend to be above the crowd? Be wary of “excellence.” It will bring you nothing but trouble and travail. Far better to take the easy path. Don’t take Robert Frost’s “path less taken.” Get on the one with the deepest rut. Outdo your fellow-travelers on the path to mediocrity. Elevate your mediocrity to the most superior form of life, and of your performance at work. This will not only make you very popular, but it will accelerate your failure. Be a role model for the mediocre.

Everyone knows that a leader, by definition, is a person who has “followers.” Which only means that it is the mediocre followers who make leaders successful – or not – in their bizarre quests. Flex your muscles. That’s where the power lies – with the mediocre. Be their champion.

The managers and executives who fail, whether out of laziness, indifference, or sheer incompetence, are the ones who preferred the path most taken: the easy path, the path worn down by millions – just like them!

There cannot be any real stigma attached to failure, of course, if “everybody” is doing it. That’s the beauty of mediocrity. Stick with the crowd. They’ll take you there with minimum effort. With a little more effort on your part, you’ll arrive there before they do.

Here’s the bottom-line:

- If you need to be liked, you will fail. Easy enough.
- If you always need to be approved of, you will fail. Be obsequious.
- If you need to go where everyone else is going, you will fail. Go with the flow.
- If you are unwilling or unable to pay the price to succeed, you will fail. If success isn’t free or at least cheap, don’t buy it. Argue for “balance.”
- If you hang out with mediocrities, you will fail. But get them to hang out with you. Be their exemplar.
- If you don’t know the difference between good advice and bad advice, you will fail. Accelerate your journey: be a raving fan for bad advice.

There you have it: Six of the “thirty-six habits” (or whatever) for achieving mediocrity.

Albert Einstein once observed,

“Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities.”

Well, okay. But where would Einstein’s opposition have come from without all of those “mediocrities”?

Take solace and validation from Somerset Maugham’s observation:

“Only a mediocre person is always at his best.”

All you have to do is be more mediocre than they are, at their own game.

See also: Ray Bennett, *The Underachiever’s Manifesto* (Chronicle Books, 2006)

Recipe #3

How to Develop Your Own Incompetence

Many of those executives who play the game but fail may be better prepared for failing than you are and may therefore have an advantage. So first, let's level the playing field.

Those executives better prepared for failure may have been more incompetent at the outset to perform their roles. If they have this advantage over you, it means you may have to consciously develop and expand your existing *incompetencies* in order to fail in your role, with more flair and dispatch, while they fail pitifully, never quite knowing why.

C. S. Lewis suggested that

“The safest road to Hell is the gradual one ...”

But, hey, you're not going to live forever. You've got to move things along if you are going to fail heroically in your own lifetime.

Here's a secret of value. It's a secret because others apparently don't know about it: The fact is that many, if not most, of the people who get appointed to high-level management or executive roles are not competent to perform in that role.

But, you're asking yourself, “Then how DID they get there?” One way is by traversing diverse and irrational paths to that position. For instance ...

- Some had parents who wanted a family member to carry on. Those executives weren't interviewed for the position. They were herded into it.
- Others relied on the “good old boys” network. Often it's because the “good old boys” figured they would be rewarded if they put Joe in the power seat. Known smilingly as inside “politics.”
- Sometimes the power brokers just decide “it's time for a change.” It's the change that's important, not the qualifications of the person.
- Sometimes they get chosen because they aren't troublesome. It's okay if the new executive rocks the boat. As long as it isn't *my* boat. Best choice: someone who rocks *no* one's boat.
- Sometimes it's impossible to know just why someone was promoted. Which usually means that the person who got put into that role is clueless, also.

Napoleon, whose “success paradigm” worked well indeed – until it failed rather spectacularly – said he didn't want “competent” field generals. He wanted “lucky” ones.

Apparently he failed at that. “Luck” works in both directions. Make sure you enlist it in your cause to get on the down side.

The fact is, people get themselves cast in roles they are incompetent to perform. They’ve never been in that particular role before. How they will perform in that role can’t be known for sure until after they’re in it. So the odds are that you will get cast in a role where you can put your incompetence to work. And, you have “luck” on your side. Since many more people fail than succeed, and since “luck” plays a significant part in both, it’s simply more likely that you will “get lucky” and *fail*.

You may have to offset the contributions of “good” luck by diligently honing your incompetencies. You can always fail by default, of course, like most others. But if you want to exhibit integrity and fail by a successful strategy for doing so, you may have to work at developing the incompetencies required, no matter what the circumstances.

*There was this guy – we’ll call him Charlie – who wanted in the worst way to be “the boss.” And he felt sure he deserved the role. Even his mother told him so. Well, as it turned out, he was selected, not because he was especially qualified in any clear way, but because he was, in the eyes of those who selected him, the **least worst** candidate for the role.*

*So he eagerly took the role on – surrounded as he was with people who had no better sense than to select him. They believed that they were superior simply because they agreed on putting Charlie in charge. That way, they were doing him a favor. Of course, they wanted favors in return. Primarily, they intended that Charlie would therefore overlook **their** incompetencies. This worked, given his belief that their choice of him meant they were really smart people. And they all lived unhappily, for a short time after.*

This is standard operating procedure in mediocre organizations. Being chosen by or being surrounded by incompetent people is a method that almost guarantees your own incompetence. Incompetent people prefer the company of other incompetent people – there is strength and justification in numbers.

How does all of this work when things are just ducky? Well, you have to work at it to fail in “good” times. Any oaf can fail in “bad” times. As paradoxical as it may seem, you have to make your incompetencies more obvious in “good” times. (Interesting how the tough times swell the ranks of failed managers and executives faster than the easy times do. It’s just that much harder to fail when things are going well.) You have to develop your incompetencies so that you can fail in spite of the upward trend. Don’t wait around for the circumstances to turn you into a failure. To be successful at failing on purpose, practice when times are good.

Here are a couple of thoughts to ponder:

Peter Drucker said,

“So much of what we call management consists in making it difficult for people to work.”

Practice *that* management function daily.

Or, this one:

A corporation board was to deliberate on the qualifications for a new department head. The board chairman opened the meeting by saying, “Let’s remember that we want someone who is not too conservative and not too radical. In other words, we want somebody just mediocre.”

That somebody could be ... you!

As you can see, lots of people in high places are ready, willing, and able to help you get on and stay on this path. Just make sure they see your mediocrity clearly. You don’t want to *appear* to be incompetent. You want to appear to be sincerely applying yourself. Work hard, put in long hours, be no real threat to anybody by accomplishing anything, and attribute your shortcomings to overwork. This is how you can play that game.

Fake it. Until you arrive at the level where the “Peter Principle” takes over and it becomes obvious to everyone that you haven’t got what it takes. Make your strategy work.

A few people are out there having a go at developing their competencies with real fervor. Be as diligent at developing your incompetencies as they are. It’s a tougher path to take, because most people are relatively incompetent by default, and therefore it’s hard to stand out in the crowd. It’s the default part you have to overcome. Even if you make failure your purpose in life, you could still get lucky and succeed in spite of yourself. Don’t let this happen, no matter how appealing it might be in your weaker moments to be successful in spite of yourself. Fail by design. You want people to say, “He did that!”

Not, “That just sort of happened to him.”

Now, here’s a cage-rattling way of looking at it that will endear you to your peers: *it takes as much competence to fail as does to succeed*. Just different kinds of competencies. Surely it has occurred to you that a kid has to be competent at ways of not doing well in school. These ways have to be practiced until they become habits. It takes habits to drive failure just as much as it takes habits to drive success.

Most people believe that you succeed by intention, but that you fail through no fault of your own. By default. They’re wrong, of course. And here’s where you can make your mark – by showing others how you failed as a result of your competencies for doing so.

There’s a lot of swaggering and chest-thumping going on these days when someone happens to be successful. Yet we know that more than half of it going either way is *sheer*

luck. Those who have some minor success don't want to share the spotlight with Lady Luck. So they take full credit for their success. It's only when you can take full credit for your failures that you'll be on solid ground. Lead the way to this revelation. People will think you're crazy. But what historical figure who changed the way people saw truth or beauty was *not* considered crazy?

That's right. Your mission is a heroic one. Don't see it that way? Well, you'll likely fail at it, then.

A key secret for how to fail is: *Avoid succeeding.* After all, most people who succeed do so in the same way as most people who fail. By default. Avoid succeeding by default, and you're a cinch.

Still, failing on purpose is much more challenging than it first appears to be. You remember Sun-tzu's *The Art of War*. Offered there are all sorts of stratagems for success. So you have to think about how you can turn those stratagems on their head.

For example, at one point, he suggests ...

“Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent.”

Practice turning these stratagems for success on their head. For instance: Even though you are incompetent, appear to be competent. Someone will notice.

Most people feel no responsibility for their own incompetencies. The mentality of mediocre organizations is that someone higher up can compensate for those at the bottom. If your intention is to fail on purpose, you don't want a bunch of busybodies trying to reform you. If the permissiveness of an environment that tolerates incompetence leaks into your organization and settles in as part of its culture, your increasing incompetencies will go unnoticed. You're probably familiar with “The Peter Principle” (mentioned earlier) – that, “in a hierarchy, every manager tends to rise to his level of total incompetence.”

One last thought. Not an unimportant one. There are basically two kinds of incompetence. One lies in failing to imagine that everything could probably be done better, and then inventing the tools or techniques – the competencies required – for doing so. The other, more mundane kind of incompetence lies in simply being incapable of carrying out the tasks you take on even though the necessary tools and techniques *are* available. *You* have to master both kinds of incompetence to fail on purpose and with flair.

“The Peter Principle” means that, like thousands of others, it may be inevitable that you will achieve failure eventually. But you want to develop your incompetencies so you can get there faster and, unlike those who ride the waves, with purpose and arrogance.

This comes from Peter Dunne's turn-of-the-century character, Mr. Dooley:

Mr. Hennessy once asked Mr. Dooley if he thought all of our accumulated knowledge had much to do with progress in the world.

“Well,” Mr. Dooley replied, “do you think it is the mill that makes the water run?”

If the lesson in that comes to you quickly, then you're a poor candidate for expeditious failure. In that case, you'll just have to work harder at it.