CEMS

⭐ **FEATURE ARTICLE**

REDEFINING FAILURE

As we emerge into a post-pandemic landscape, many of the world's foremost economic and inter-governmental authorities are talking about a global "reset;" an opportunity to pause and rethink the processes and systems that have brought us to this point. According to the World Economic Forum and others, we are now in front of an opportunity to reset the way we live and work, in order to build a better future.

P art of this resetting of ideas is beginning to focus on the kinds of capabilities and skills humans and organisations need in order to manage the uncertainty that Covid-19 has unleashed. Within the CEMS community, there is renewed sense of urgency around new models of leadership and organisational culture that can build resilience.

Global Head of Rewards and VP for CEMS Corporate Partner, Hilti, Bianca Wong is an expert in talent pipeline development, leadership coaching, engagement, and high performance in the workforce. Resilience is an aptitude that can be acquired, she says, and it has everything to do with failure.

Resilience is a skill that can be learned

"Resilience is all about the lived experience," says Bianca. "And in particular, it's about how you respond to setbacks, hurdles and failures. Resilience comes from the experience of failure, and – critically – how you learn from that experience; how you turn that learning into knowledge, agility, emotional intelligence and the flexibility of mindset to navigate the challenges you face. In terms of learning, there's the obvious part: learning not to make the same mistake again. But there's also critical psychological learning that comes from how you look at your failure and feel about the experience. As a leader, I want to know how my team is going to channel these feelings into building greater resilience and an enhanced EQ going forward. And that requires honesty, openness and transparency."

In the corporate environment, success is the traditional measure of performance. Failure, on the other hand, is traditionally synonymous with incompetence; we perceive failure as an inability to achieve the expected or desired outcome. There are cognitive and emotional associations with inadequacy that we may naturally want to conceal.

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"We have an amazing opportunity ahead of us to shift from sovereign systems to systems of collaboration. We can make the shift from currencies to cryptocurrencies; from the old metrics that we use to measures performance – labour, education, health – to a more holistic approach that looks at the whole country. We can afford to be much more fluid in terms of technology integration in the way that we work and the way that large organisations collaborate with more agile operators. There are many opportunities ahead of us to look at the crisis, learn from it and enact a reset in our thinking, our systems and processes. It's up to us."
Fadi Farra, Whiteshield

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"I think there's a common feeling in my age group to push yourself to the limits and take pride in that. There's almost a glorification of doing what it takes, while prioritising your own wellbeing is still not really common or accepted. When you are young, you are firing on all cylinders to get ahead and to prove your worth. And there's this flawed thinking around now being the time to push, and resting up when we're older."
Juliette ten Brink, Salesforce

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"We're constantly failing at Muntagnard. I'd say that what we do is fail forward in a sense. When you are innovating, when you are trying to do something essentially different, you have to experiment before you get it right. Starting something new, you are really finding your way as you go along and you'll get it wrong, but you will also get it right. You just have to keep overcoming the challenges and tapping into every opportunity."
Dario Pirovino, Muntagnard

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But if failure is an "essential prerequisite to organisational learning," as Bianca says – if failure is the mechanism through which we learn to stop, think, question the way we do things, find new paths forward and build resilience – then how do we reframe it such that individuals, teams and organisations feel empowered to own their failures? How do we encourage people to be open about the times that they have failed and what they have learned from the experience?

Time to normalize failure

There is a strong argument, says Bianca, for shifting thinking around failure – and to do so earlier in people's careers. Normalising failure as a function of learning means providing a "psychological safety net" within the workplace culture that empowers people to go through adversity, to experience failure, and to pick themselves up, learn and move forward, without causing long-term damage. And to do so from the very start of their careers.

"This kind of safety net must be in place from the very start. It needs to be something that we teach our youngest employees, our graduates and those at the very start of their careers. And it's a challenge. If organisations are all about KPIs and targets, and recognition is tied to success, the same is arguably true of our management programmes."

In our teaching and in the lore that surrounds business and entrepreneurial successes, says Bianca, we have a tendency to shape the narrative retrospectively. These are stories that are told from the vantage point of success, and such mishaps or missteps that may have happened along the way are woven into the chronology such that they reinforce the accomplishments or the achievements of this or that CEO – after the event.

"We all know the stories of success overcoming adversity: the James Dysons or the Larry Ellisons. But the reality is that we only tend to hear about these failures after the success. Once reputations are established and consolidated, achievements set in stone – then we hear about the failures en route to that success."

There are not enough "common stories" about people who have "just bounced back and got on with it" to normalise failure, she adds.

Uncertainty is our reality

In 2021, we are still subject to waves of global, societal and commercial uncertainty that have the potential to derail progress. We do not know yet what 2022 holds in store; whether the seminal breakthroughs in vaccine development will be able to keep pace with the mutations of the virus or indeed, what other crises may still be waiting in the shadows. In this environment, we have no choice but to focus on building the strength, buoyancy and resilience to power through and sustain forward momentum.

In 2020, as the pandemic raged around the planet, there were stunning examples of organisations that found the wherewithal not only weather the storm, but to thrive under adversity. The shift in the restaurant business from eat-in to deliveries is well documented. So too are the successes of Unilever and others, who have been able to prioritise certain product

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"If there's no failure, there's also no success. The 'fail-fast' mindset might feel like a buzzword, but it's also very true. Even if you are doing really well … you still need to open up your mind to the potential of failure to take chances. And in my case, the client had to realise that in an environment where people don't dare to fail, their decision-making will only ever be average at best."
Marvin Karrasch, Integration Consulting

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lines – skin and surface cleaners, packaged food and so on – where demand had previously fallen. This kind of pivoting, the transformation of business models, the agility and creativity in reframing the crisis from threat to opportunity – all of this speaks to a culture of not being afraid to take risks.

These innovations and adaptations are the result of trial and error, says Bianca.

"What we are witnessing here is the dynamic of failing and bouncing back. And bouncing back doesn't necessarily mean bouncing back to the same place. You can bounce back in different ways."

None of this is particularly new, she adds. We have always talked about innovation stemming from failure: "It's not a new concept, it's just feels much more real right now to just about everyone. The key is to learn."

PHOTO ABOVE:
Bianca Wong
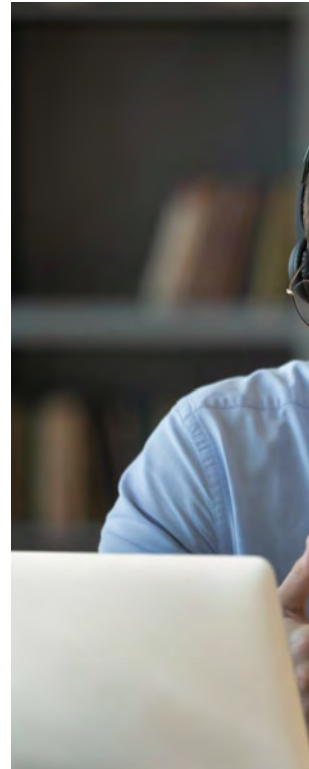
So what do we need to do to learn?

According to Bianca, there are three core steps for organisation, for team leaders and for Learning and Development functions.

1. Corporations need to set the frame.
And this doesn't necessarily mean celebrating failure per se. The imperative to grow and to maintain a spirit of positivity remains. What it does mean is creating the framework that allows people
to feel comfortable experimenting and failing. It means setting the tone for team leaders to have open discussions with their teams. And to achieve this, it is key that corporations become learning organisations.

2. Team leaders also play an important role.
And upskilling leaders to support their teams

means developing the emotional and communication skills to empower people to be explicit – to share their vulnerability and to be open with their leaders. Development dialogue must encompass personal growth as well as KPI acheivements. And the competencies to enact this kind of human exchange must also become part of the critical leadership toolkit.

3. Learning and Development or HR functions have a duty to destigmatise failure.
They need to find the programmes and processes to create safe environments, and reinforce the message that struggling is not a cause for shame. Encouraging people – specially young people – to explore their feelings, to build awareness of themselves and to unblock their creativity is critical to driving learning and resilience.

"Business schools too have a duty to provide a safe environment for young people to experiment, to fail, to learn from the experience and to build the competencies and attitudes that will help them be successful in life – in any life, a focus on grades is increasingly defunct, she stresses"

"As a corporate culture and particularly within the HR function we prioritise transparency and openness and we really work to model a more vulnerable model of leader and mentorship. I am the first to share my own experiences as a tangible way of showing young people that no one is perfect."
Alžbeta Budinská, Skoda

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"I think it's time we normalised talking about our wellbeing and made it something cool and something just as important as knowledge or skillsets to aspire to and feel proud about. And I think that this needs to inform education just as much as it should inform leadership and workplace culture."
Juliette ten Brink, Salesforce

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And the role of business education?

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A focus on grades is increasingly defunct, she stresses.

"We know that firms are looking much less at so-called hard skills today, and are more focused on the emotional strengths that candidates can bring. And business schools have a real opportunity to create an environment for young people to explore who they are and how they react to change and uncertainty. We need to be thinking about helping them build the mental strength not just to be successful at school, but to thrive when they enter the 'real world' outside."

CEMS is well positioned here, Bianca notes. CEMS students are a younger cohort than MBAs. They are at an inflection point as they venture out into the world. This is a "sweet spot" to experience and build the soft skills and the mental fortitude they will need; to "strengthen this muscle," says Bianca.

One way of doing so is to reframe internships as emotional learning experiences. And to "curate the experience of failure" that is an inherent to them.

"CEMS convenes students with huge potential and gives them the international exposure and internships with real businesses to build knowledge and skills. Internships are fantastic, but I believe that as educators, we need to really unpack these experiences. We need to get students talking about them, reflecting and opening up – and expressing their vulnerability."

"I can't say this clearly enough: grades simply don't matter anymore. What we need are future leaders with the human skills to articulate and model their own vulnerability and encourage others to do the same. And business schools are uniquely positioned to teach and coach these skills. We need to be clear about this because the future of work hinges on the future of education."