

# Career Mistakes:



## Failure is a *Great* Option

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There's a gripping moment in the movie *Apollo 13* where Gene Kranz is telling his Houston team that they have to figure out a way to bring the crew back, and he barks "Failure is not an option!"

That's probably true if you're Mission Control for a bunch of people floating in a dead spaceship. In fact, it was the name of Kranz's book: *Failure Is Not an Option: Mission Control From Mercury to Apollo 13 and Beyond*. That mentality is fortifying and inspiring, like Cortez burning the ships. My generation grew up with that idea, that "Never surrender. Never accept failure" credo. But the truth is, these days, it's mostly bullshit.

If you're like most people, failure is sometimes not only an option, but it's inevitable. And to take it one step further, it's essential. You don't learn unless you fail. And unless you're willing to fail, you are unlikely to venture anything very impressive. Some of my biggest leaps forward began with tripping. I can pinpoint, myself, the moments of my biggest career failure. And because I went back and analyzed it like the good recovering engineer that I am, I can see how each one propelled me forward. Here they are:

## **Mistake 1: I Was Seduced by a Former Manager**

To be clear, I'm a happily married man. But in the late 1990s, when I was working for IBM in a briefing center, I was bored. My job was to give the inside scoop on various products to IBM's leading customers. For me it was an easy job. The presentations were deeply technical, but I understood them and crafted the information into six or seven presentations that I could have given in my sleep.

The great part of the job was that, because I was an ambassador for our top clients, I was highly visible to upper management. For that reason, they often asked me to present at leading conferences. I got tons of swag: I received jackets, shirts, hats, bags, etc...everything to dress myself except underwear, slacks, shoes, and socks.

But after seven years of doing this job, I was ready for a new challenge.

My manager (who was great) had left the previous year to work for IBM Global Services, the IBM consulting arm. She knew I was bored and worked on me to join her group. She painted a very rosy picture, so, after about six months, I made the leap. It was one of the biggest mistakes of my career.

I had allowed myself to be seduced, as did several other people she knew in the organization with deep consulting experience. I don't think she intended anything

negative for any of us. But we should have done our homework rather than just accepting her description of the job. I realized that almost as soon as I took it.

The job required me to sit for long hours developing technical proposals, a task for which I did not have the attention span. I also really suck at writing technical proposals, possibly because I don't like sitting around developing them. My first set of proposals was lambasted, not because of the technical stuff but because of the writing.

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I also couldn't pick my projects. I was put on a team developing a point-of-sale solution for one of the national short term loan companies (pawn shops). The more I learned about the business, the more I wanted out of there. Loaning money to the poor at 20% a month (not 20% a year like your credit card providers) made me ill.

Finally, I had really enjoyed my team in the briefing center but my new team comprised mostly unhappy single people, unhappy divorced people and unhappy married people. Most of them had traveled too much in their careers and had poor personal relationships in their lives. Not fun. I missed my old team.

Then one day, about six months in, my young project manager attempted to publicly humiliate me in front of the team for my poor writing skills. So I quit. I quit the project and I quit being a consultant.

It took me two months to find another position within the marketing division of IBM, but even as I took the job, I knew this was a holding place. Less than a year later, I left IBM after 22 years to go to work for a successful semi-conductor startup.

## **Mistake 2: Taking My Dream Job**

Big Mistake Number Two was going full bore after what I believed to be my dream job. You know dream jobs: working in the embassy in Paris, owning a B&B, being a recruiter for the NFL.... They look perfect, like career Valhalla, except most of us choose a dream job without ever investigating what they actually entail. My dream job was more of the *To Sir, With Love, Stand and Deliver, Freedom Writers* variety. I went to teach high school math in an inner city school.

I had been developing curriculum and teaching engineers on-and-off for 20 plus years in approximately 35 different countries. Heck, if I could train engineers in the People's Republic of China, I was sure I could teach Algebra I and II to teenagers. And I could. But that's not all you have to know about the job you're going into.

First of all, no one told me that the average math teacher in Texas leaves the profession in fewer than five years. When I asked teachers about their experiences, they sugar coated their answers. They didn't tell me that being an experienced 40-something can be a bad thing in a school system, where administrators prefer to deal with compliant, new grads. They didn't warn me that the hiring process was obscure and convoluted, and when I went through the alternative certification process at my local community college, my gut was telling me that I was not going to be prepared.

Most dream jobs are mistakes waiting to happen.

Most of all, I was not prepared for the trauma of working with a bunch of kids whose problems in life were far beyond what I could get my head around or do anything about. I thought that since I was an expert in multiple cultures, a veteran instructor and a tough guy, I could handle it. The culture of poverty introduced me to things beyond what I could handle.

I was good at what I did. I had a tremendous success rate and I touched many lives. That's the whole reason I went into the job in the first place. If that had been enough, I'd still be there. But the whole experience tore me up emotionally and physically. What made it worse was that the team of mentors who got me through the first year were all gone the next fall. I thought I could handle it without them. I was wrong. In hindsight, I should have quit at the end of my first year.

But I am a Baby Boomer. When we undertake to do a thing, we have to see it through or be a "quitter." I tried to follow the immortal words of Winston Churchill: "Never, never, never give up." Until you really have no choice. You should give up before then.

I was often approached by former colleagues telling me that they planned to follow in my footsteps when they retired. Most dream jobs are mistakes waiting to happen.

### **Mistake 3: I Can Make This Work**

The next of my mistakes was to take a job that was not optimal, but I told myself "I can make this work." I had gone into teaching to do something meaningful, and when I left I still wanted to do something meaningful. So I looked for a job working for a non-profit.

Since I had spent a considerable amount of my previous 15 years in sales support, I thought I'd be great at a fundraising position. By the way—we have way too many non-profits in Austin, Texas, most of whom have either no salaried positions, or very few.

I pursued jobs at organizations where their missions aligned with my own values. But I got nowhere. I broadened my search to include non-profits that were “close enough.”

Soon, I was hired by the local Jewish community center to build a corporate giving program. It is a worthy organization, but I'd chosen it because it was a non-profit with a job, not because it was doing something I was already excited about. Its mission, while good, isn't really aligned with what's important to me. And frankly, being a non-Jew as the face for a Jewish organization is...interesting! Austin has very few Jewish-owned businesses, which made it even more difficult. Plus, I saw telltale signs of the impending great recession. All of the banks I approached were very friendly, but kindly showed me the door. I had a position that would eventually be eliminated. Finally, I was rapidly figuring out that I could not tolerate the dysfunctional behavior of non-profits. I was used to getting things done but that is not how things typically work in non-profits.

After six months, I decided I would leave right after the big fall gala. I would take vacation and then turn in my resignation. I lasted a year, but I made the decision pretty early on that this was not for me. Despite what I told myself, I could not make it work.

## **Failure's Upside**

Actually, I am happy I took all three jobs. I learned a tremendous amount about consulting, public education and non-profits. I learned a lot about myself:

- My team is really important
- I do not have unlimited energy to muscle through difficult situations
- The mission is really important to me

But I also figured out a plan, based on my failures, that can help anyone who is getting ready to make a Career Pivot. Because very few of us just hop from one career into the perfect one without some experimentation. People getting ready to reinvent themselves needs to get their infrastructure in place (more than I did).

## **Rules of Reinvention**

**Have a Plan B:** Be prepared to pull the plug on the reinvention project. Have a clear timeline and metrics to determine whether you will be successful. For example, you might have five goals you're working on in terms of finances, skills learned or happiness. Give yourself short windows to achieve these and evaluate realistically. If you're not hitting them, it's time to rethink your plan.

Don't wait and develop your Plan B in the middle of taking a new job, have it in place from day one. Make sure the work you're doing is something that you could pivot into something else. The big fear is moving away from your skill set and falling behind

without building anything you can use in your next job if this one doesn't work out. Keep your network fresh even as you're working in a new job or industry.

Don't cling to a mistake just because it took you so long to make it.

With the bad consulting job, I knew that I could find a position in the division I left within IBM. It took two months, and the consulting group did not push me to find anything quickly. That was a solid

Plan B. With the teaching job, there was no Plan B. I had left my tech job two years before which meant that I was already out of date. With my non-profit, I decided to leave several months before I actually did, and knew I wanted to take a few months to rest. In the fall, I was approached with three technology opportunities. Quickly, I had multiple Plan Bs! I took a long vacation, and was hired in December of 2007 by a tech startup to develop a training and certification program.

**Learn from Your Mistakes:** The way you turn a mistake into something good is by learning from the experience. You always have to take stock of choices and actions from your past and what you can take away that will make tomorrow's choices and actions better. I learned a ton from my mistakes.

From my first mistake I learned how important a team was to me, what kinds of work I don't like, and that you have to do your homework before you take a job. I actually relearned all those lessons in teaching. But I also realized it stimulated my entrepreneurial juices to be in this old battleship called public education. I mentored my principal as we went through a high school redesign. It was clear to me that I would eventually work for myself to fix real-world problems. I also learned that I did not have the emotional stamina to work with teenagers who had problems most of us cannot even imagine.

At the non-profit I learned that I really need to understand how organizational rules apply to my job before I take it. I assumed that I could get groups within the organization to work with me, to do things differently, to think a little differently—boy, was I wrong! Working inside of a non-profit was not for me.

**Fail Fast: Failure *Is* An Option:** In the tech world, especially in Silicon Valley, there's a rallying cry of "fail fast, fail often." If you have that mentality, it means you're someone who is going to take some risk, try for big things. This mentality is very hard for someone who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s to adapt. We were taught to be risk averse. You can put money in the stock market, but only the Blue Chips and make sure your bills are paid and you have plenty in savings first.

I had a discussion with a FranNet consultant a couple of years ago. He told me about the people he met in 2002-2004 who had been laid off after the dot-com bubble had burst. Many of them had a lot of money in retirement accounts. He told them never to put more than 10% of their net worth into a franchise. They could afford to take the risk, but were terrified of failing. They were still too risk averse to take the chance.

But the world has changed. If you were unemployed in the 1960s and did not find a job quickly, there was something wrong with you. Today, a massive percentage of the population has been touched by unemployment. Being unemployed is no longer a red flag on your record.

Fail fast is very hard for someone who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s to adapt. We were taught to be risk averse.

And a lot of people would rather start their own businesses than get another job where someone else has a lot to say about their success and failure. Before the early 2000s, the upfront investment to start a business was huge. Most people would need to get a significant loan. If you were to fail, the financial and personal consequences would be very big. That is why most of us became employees.

That's no longer the case. If you have a laptop and an internet connection and some hustle, you can start a business right now, no money down. In the last five years I have:

- Published two books without a publisher, and successfully sold a couple of thousand copies.

- Created a website and blog which garners over 10,000 visitors a month without a major capital investment.
- Created a highly recognizable brand—Career Pivot.

All of this was done with very small financial investment, but with a lot of sweat equity.

I belong to several technology meetups where new companies are rapidly formed. They develop a plan to create an app. They sign up for Amazon Web Services, rent space at a co-working facility, and start developing the product. Total investment? Less than \$10K. Ten years ago, the initial investment was probably closer to \$1M or more.

And if you fail, it's not a catastrophe. But you should fail fast. In two of the three situations, I failed within six months. This greatly eased my recovery. When I forced myself to stick it out, the recovery was much more painful. You also get farther away from your skills and network.

I've talked to so many people who hung on to their reinvention until they could no longer make it. They have yet to recover. They stuck to it so long that their connections with their previous career was lost. As the adage goes: "Don't cling to a mistake just because it took you so long to make it."

If you're not failing, you're not growing. But you have to be doing both. Have a plan, have a way to gauge whether it's working and jump ship when it isn't. Unlike with the Apollo mission, if you've planned it right, another ship will come along soon enough.