

# Sometimes You Win – Sometimes You Learn

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*Life's Greatest Lessons Are Gained from Our Losses*

John C. Maxwell

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## **INTRODUCTION**

John Maxwell suggests that people who are successful view losing differently than most people do. These individuals do not hide from failure or shy away from it. They have learned that the greatest lessons in life come from losses, as long as they are approached correctly. Losses can affect people mentally and emotionally. Learning is not easy to do when a person feels sad or is numb with defeat. Maxwell proposes a roadmap that people can follow to become unstuck from emotions caused by losses.

## **WHEN YOU'RE LOSING, EVERYTHING HURTS**

Life is full of losses, from simple losses like losing a toy as a child to losing physical capabilities as an aging adult. Money is lost and opportunities are missed. Negative experiences tend to affect people more deeply than positive ones. Often, people continue to linger on the emotions that result from negative experiences instead of moving on in life. Losses build up and can be defeating, building a prison of debilitating emotions like anxiety or fear that make people feel weak, disheartened, or even sick.

Positive experiences help build confidence in people; however, negative experiences can cause people to fall into 11 traps of inaction:

1. Being afraid to make mistakes
2. Being too tired to act
3. Feeling inferior to others
4. Hesitating to make decisions
5. Being demotivated and uninspired
6. Losing perspective
7. Questioning their own abilities
8. Being overly focused on the difficulties
9. Feeling that things are not fair or just
10. Worrying too much about the opinions of others
11. Developing poor self-images

An incorrect response to a loss, or no response at all, builds a prison of emotions, which leads to decreased self-confidence. Successful people realize that they will face many losses in life and will need to address them as they occur, not letting the emotions build up.

Losing gives people the opportunity to learn; however, many people do not grasp these opportunities. Thus, when they experience loss, it really hurts. Emmet Fox once observed that difficulties arrive in people's lives when they are ready to grow and move ahead by overcoming them. "The only real misfortune," he noted, "the only real tragedy, comes when we suffer without learning the lesson." Maxwell's roadmap can be a guide for people who want to gain the ability to learn from adversity and manage disappointment and loss.

## **HUMILITY: THE SPIRIT OF LEARNING**

Those who can gain from adversity have an internal spirit of humility and try to learn from their mistakes. In contrast, people who are filled with pride are not willing to admit mistakes, so they fail to learn from adversity.

Pride manifests itself in several ways. Proud individuals:

- Do not take responsibility and like to blame others for their mistakes.
- Are unrealistic and not objective.
- Are not receptive to new ideas and instead reject them.
- Are inflexible.
- Inflate themselves and deflate others because they are insecure.
- Are out of touch and do not connect with others.

Those who are currently not filled with a humble spirit are unable to learn, but they can change their attitudes. The people who reach high levels of achievement are those who possess the humble spirit of learning. Humility allows them to have an honest perspective of themselves and life, enabling them to learn and grow in the face of losses. Humble people realize that they will never be perfect, but they can be successful as they make the most from their mistakes.

## **REALITY: THE FOUNDATION OF LEARNING**

When people lose sight of reality, they quickly lose their way and cannot create positive changes in their lives. Escaping from reality can provide temporary relief from difficulties, but it is easier to move from failure to success than from excuses to success. Some people expect life to be easy; they expect their lives to be free of hassles. However, that is not realistic. In truth, life is difficult, unfair, and no one can escape problems, failures, and losses.

Some people find that life is more difficult for them than for others, but those people who are successful in life have not escaped pain, loss, or unfairness. Successful individuals learn to accept difficulties and move ahead in spite of them.

Everyone faces difficulties in life. However, some people seem to make things even more difficult for themselves by getting trapped in these behaviours:

- Not making an intentional effort to learn
- Not thinking through problems effectively
- Refusing to face reality
- Rationalising instead of cutting losses
- Not responding to adversity correctly with the best solution

## **RESPONSIBILITY: THE FIRST STEP OF LEARNING**

The most important ability that a person can possess is responsibility. Not only is responsibility something that can be given to a person, but it's something that a person can take. The person must be willing to take responsibility in order to take control of his or her life. When people take responsibility for their lives, actions, mistakes, and growth, they can learn from failure and win. On the other hand, when people continually avoid taking responsibility, they:

- Develop a victim mentality. They focus on things they cannot do instead of things they can do, which sets them up for continued failure.
- Have an unrealistic perspective about the way life works. They dwell too long on finding reasons for their difficulties and lament misfortunes instead of moving forward with their lives.
- Look for others to blame. They do not examine their own shortcomings.
- Eliminate any opportunity to grow. When people do not take responsibility for their lives, they give up control of their lives and the power to grow as individuals.

When people stop making excuses and start taking responsibility for their choices, their lives can change dramatically.

By taking responsibility:

- people become wiser
- view things with the proper perspective
- know their losses and failures are not permanent
- learn from failures
- gain strength, courage, and confidence each time they overcome problems
- and ensure their actions align with their words.

## **IMPROVEMENT: THE FOCUS OF LEARNING**

Successful people usually have a strong desire to improve themselves. They do not expect to become perfect, but they want to perform at higher levels, which means they aim for continual self-improvement.

When unsuccessful people fail or make mistakes, they may react with anger or blame, try to hide their mistakes or hide from those who could discover their mistakes – or just give up and quit. They rarely address their errors in a healthy way, and therefore may not learn and improve.

They also observe others who strive to improve. Some typical observations include:

- Those who want to improve their lives tend to start by improving themselves first.
- To succeed, people must step out of their comfort zones. Facing the unknown to overcome obstacles leads to success.
- Successful people do not focus on quick fixes; instead, they keep working to slowly, steadily, and continually improve.
- Successful people spend time each day evaluating their own performance and finding ways to improve it.

Anyone can improve. Improvement is the focus of learning. To start down the improvement path, people can take three steps:

1. They can decide they are worth improving.
2. They can focus on a particular aspect of themselves to improve.
3. They can seek opportunities to improve whenever they experience losses or failures.

## **HOPE: THE MOTIVATION OF LEARNING**

Losses are difficult to bear, but one loss that no one should experience is the loss of hope. When people lose hope, they lose the motivation and ability to continue to learn. Hope provides people with the strength and courage to say "yes" to life despite hardships and pain. Hope fills people with energy as they welcome life's challenges. Hopeful people focus on plans for the future, opening them up to greater possibilities. Having hope can make a difference for most people. It is a powerful asset. With hope, a failure becomes just another step; without hope, a failure becomes a dead end.

Anyone can have hope regardless of their present circumstances. The three following steps may help people gain hope:

1. They can choose to hope, knowing that it will motivate them to turn from being victims to being victors.
2. They can change their mindsets from negative thinking to positive thinking, learning from mistakes.
3. They can take small steps to achieve small victories –nothing encourages hope like success.

## **TEACHABILITY: THE PATHWAY OF LEARNING**

Having a teachable spirit is what most determines if a person will reach his or her potential.

Teachability is having an intentional attitude and behaviour to keep learning and growing throughout life. People who want to become highly teachable usually aim to cultivate the following traits:

- Have open hearts and minds and be alert to new opportunities. Teachability depends on capacity and attitude. Although people usually have a fixed capacity for learning, having an attitude that is conducive to learning is a choice and is much more important to success than intelligence, education, talent, or luck.
- Approach things as beginners, not experts. Teachable individuals believe they can learn from everyone, every day. They stay open and humble and ask lots of questions instead of giving answers.

- Determine if they themselves are the cause of the problem. If they are, they make changes so they do not repeat their errors.
- Surround themselves with others who will honestly and lovingly speak freely to them. They know they must have strong relationships with those close to them and must graciously accept their feedback.
- Learn something new every day and gain knowledge and wisdom in small, incremental steps. Some daily activities they practice include: (1) Preparing by determining what activities and people in their daily schedules can teach them something, (2) observing and reflecting on their daily successes and failures, and (3) taking actions to apply what they have learned to their lives.

## **ADVERSITY: THE CATALYST FOR LEARNING**

Successful people look at adversity as a catalyst for learning. When they face adversity with the right mindset, they discover hidden advantages, such as:

- Adversity offers the opportunity for self-discovery. Adversity challenges people's lives, gives them new points of view, brings out deep emotions, and tests their strength.
- People can learn more from adversity than from success. The only misfortune occurs when people are faced with adversity and gain no lesson because they did not want to learn from their difficulties.
- Opportunities often arise from adversity. Successful people do not let adversity get them down; instead, they take advantage of new personal and business opportunities brought about by adversity.
- Adversity can instigate a positive transition. Successful people know that life is a series of transitions; a positive response to adversity allows them to transition to greater things.
- People can realise profit as well as experience pain during adversity. Successful people expect to experience pain when they face adversity, but they are prepared to reap the benefits from it as well.
- Adversity can be a stepping-stone or tombstone depending on how people respond to it. People can either step up to the challenge of using adversity as a catalyst for learning, or they can let adversity deal them a mortal blow.

## **PROBLEMS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING**

In order to overcome problems and learn from them, successful people learn how best to approach them. They also learn what not to do. They know that they must not underestimate problems or fail to take problems seriously. At the same time, they know that if they overestimate their problems, they exaggerate the impact of the problems, which leads to inappropriate responses or even despair. Successful people never wait for problems to solve themselves; they remain patient while working on solutions. Problems that do not get addressed can become worse, yet problems can also become worse with inappropriate responses, such as losing perspective, ignoring priorities, feeling sorry for oneself, or blaming others.

Besides avoiding incorrect responses, successful people also learn correct responses to overcoming problems. They anticipate problems without worrying about them all the time. They know that they

must communicate their problems to others to clarify the problems and seek help. Successful people learn to evaluate problems, determining the real issues at hand and who is involved. They learn to appreciate problems as catalysts for learning and couriers of new opportunities.

## **BAD EXPERIENCES: THE PERSPECTIVE FOR LEARNING**

Bad experiences happen to everyone. No one seeks out these bad experiences, but negative experiences can do some good if the people experiencing them are willing to gain from them. People rarely see the benefits they can derive from bad experiences while they are in the midst of them. They usually gain better perspectives after those experiences are finished. Successful people have learned to react to bad experiences in the following ways:

- They realise they will fail sometimes, and they learn to graciously accept their human imperfections.
- They find the humour in bad situations, which tends to lighten their loads.
- They respond correctly to bad experiences by not judging their self-worth, not feeling sorry for themselves, and viewing their failures as opportunities to learn and improve.
- They do not give up; they know that failure occurs when seeking new challenges.
- They use critical thinking skills and do not let bad experiences become worse.
- They turn bad experiences into good ones by learning from them.

## **CHANGE: THE PRICE OF LEARNING**

The world is always changing, and it affects everyone. However, many people resist change – both leaders and followers. Change introduces the unfamiliar and can feel awkward. People are often afraid to go against traditions and established processes that have worked for them in the past. Successful people know that those who insist on retaining yesterday's methods will not be in business tomorrow.

People often respond poorly to change. For example, many people:

- Distance themselves from change by putting in only enough effort to change their circumstances and not themselves.
- Continue to perform with the same methods, yet expect different results.
- View change as painful instead of a helpful opportunity.
- End up paying a much bigger price in the future when change is forced upon them.

People will make changes under certain conditions:

- They hurt enough that they have to change.
- They learn enough that they want to change.
- They receive enough help that they are able to change.

People rarely make changes instantaneously; instead, they usually accept new information first and then adopt new attitudes, followed by practicing new behaviours and actions. Lastly, they change and develop new convictions, influencing others to change as well.

Successful people have learned to make changes that help them improve and grow. They typically seek to become better people by taking incremental steps to improve. They also change their attitudes, learning that they cannot change things outside of their control. They make the painful choice to sever relationships with others who are not growing or who have become negative influences. They make a conscious effort to live life above and beyond the average. Most importantly, they strive to unlearn out-dated or wrong methods so they can learn more effective ones.

## **MATURITY: THE VALUE OF LEARNING**

A mature person is someone who has learned from losses, has attained wisdom, and is emotionally strong and mentally stable when facing the difficulties of life. When people follow through with the ideas discussed in Maxwell's book, they are rewarded with maturity. Successful, mature individuals achieve the true value of learning because they:

- Learn from their mistakes and apply the learning to future actions.
- Act upon their positive emotions and allow them to dominate their negative ones.
- Discipline themselves to develop good habits that lead to correct actions.
- Postpone gratification, knowing that the sacrifices they make today will lead to tomorrow's successes.
- Learn how to earn respect for themselves and others.

## **WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING, BUT LEARNING IS**

Most people want to win, but winning is not everything. However, learning is. One of the dangers of winning is that winners become complacent and stop making efforts to learn, improve, and grow. Too often, winners are their worst enemies. With a wrong attitude, winners quickly become losers. Successful people learn that they must retain a hunger for learning and growing, whether they win or lose. They know that learning is possible only when they change their thinking patterns and keep positive attitudes, but not when they assume that they know everything.

Successful people also realise that they must alter their behaviours to integrate what they learn into their lives. Their continued success will be the result of continual failures and learning from their difficulties. Only through taking risks, trying new things, and experiencing failures will people learn and succeed. Successful people have learned to take advantage of their strengths while at the same time being willing to leave their comfort zones. The greatest education they will receive is when they take risks in their areas of strength, because they can recover more quickly from failures and take actions to improve with their newly gained knowledge.

## **KEY CONCEPTS**

Successful people have not escaped pain, loss, or unfairness; they face the reality of those difficulties and move ahead in spite of them.

When people take responsibility for their lives, actions, mistakes, and growth, they can learn from failure and win.

Successful people have a strong desire to perform at higher levels, which means they must learn in order to improve.

Hopeful people focus on plans for the future, opening them up to greater possibilities as they face life's challenges.

Having a teachable spirit is what most determines if a person will reach his or her potential.

Successful people appreciate problems as catalysts for learning and couriers of new opportunities.

Mature people have learned from losses, have attained wisdom, and are emotionally strong and mentally stable when facing life's difficulties.

Successful people learn to take risks in their areas of strength because they can recover more quickly from failures and take actions to improve with their newly gained knowledge.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John C. Maxwell is an internationally recognised leadership expert, speaker and author. In May 2014, Maxwell was named the #1 leadership and management expert in the world by Inc. magazine. He is the founder of INJOY, Maximum Impact, ISS and EQUIP. A *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Business Week* best-selling author, Maxwell was one of 25 authors named to amazon.com's 10th Anniversary Hall of Fame. Three of his books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, *Developing the Leader Within You*, and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*, have each sold over one million copies. Maxwell serves on the Board of Trustees at Indiana Wesleyan University.