

## The Right Way to Respond to Failure by Peter Bregman

□ My wife Eleanor and I were visiting some friends on a Saturday when their nine-year-old daughter, Dana\*, came home. She was close to tears, barely holding it together.

□ "Oh sweetie," her mom said. "What happened at the swim meet?"

□ Dana is an excellent swimmer. She trains hard, arriving at swim practice by six most mornings and swimming some afternoons as well. And her efforts are rewarded; she often wins her events, scoring points for her swim team. It is clear she is very proud of these wins.

□ It isn't like that for all her endeavors. She struggles with some subjects in school, doing extra math homework to keep up with the other kids and getting special help with her reading. But she always works hard.

□ "I was disqualified," she told us. She swam the race well, but dove in a fraction of a second before the starting gun went off: a false start.

□ We were in the foyer of the house and she sat down on the bottom stair of the staircase, her swim bag still on her shoulder, staring into space, almost expressionless.

□ "Honey," her dad said, "there are a lot more swim meets in the season. You'll have other chances to win."

□ I told her, "The fact that you left the block prematurely means you were at your edge. You're trying not to waste a millisecond in hesitation. That's the right instinct. You misjudged the timing but that's OK. The more you do this, the better you'll get at it."

□ "Every swimmer on every team has been disqualified at some point," Eleanor said. "It's part of the sport."

□ "I'm sure your coach will help you practice your starts before the next meet," her mom said, "and you'll figure out exactly when to spring off the block so that you don't waste a second but you don't dive too early either. You'll get it."

□ Nothing we said seemed to have any impact on her. Nothing changed her expressionless stare. Nothing helped.

□ Then her grandmother Mimi walked over.

□We were all standing over Dana, when Mimi moved through us and sat down next to her. She put her arm around Dana and just sat there quietly. Eventually, Dana leaned her head on Mimi's shoulder. After a few moments of silence Mimi kissed Dana's head and said, "I know how hard you work at this, honey. It's sad to get disqualified."

□At that point, Dana began to cry. Mimi continued to sit there, with her arm around Dana, for several minutes, without saying anything.

□Eventually Dana looked up at Mimi, wiped her tears, and said, simply, "Thanks Mimi." And I thought, every leader, every manager, every team member, should see this.

□All of us except Mimi missed what Dana needed.

□We tried to make her feel better by helping her see the advantage of failure, putting the defeat in context, teaching her to draw a lesson from it, and motivating her to work harder and get better so it doesn't happen again.

□But she didn't need any of that. She already knew it. And if she didn't, she'd figure it out on her own. The thing she needed, the thing she couldn't give herself, the thing that Mimi reached out and gave her?

□Empathy.

□She needed to feel that she wasn't alone, that we all loved her and her failure didn't change that, She needed to know we understood how she was feeling and we had confidence that she would figure it out.

□I wanted every leader, manager, and team member to see that, because the empathetic response to failure is not only the most compassionate, it's also the most productive.

□Empathy communicates trust. And people perform best when they feel trusted.

□When I sit with you in your mistake or failure without trying to change anything, I'm letting you know that you're okay, even when you don't perform. And, counter-intuitively, feeling okay about yourself — when you fail — makes you feel good enough to get up and try again.

□Most of us miss that. Typically, when people fail, we blame them. Or teach them. Or try to make them feel better. All of which, paradoxically, makes them feel worse. It also prompts defensiveness as an act of self-preservation. (If I'm not okay after a failure, I'd better figure out how to frame this thing so it's not my failure.)

□Our intentions are fine; we want the person to feel better, to learn, to avoid the mistake again. We want to protect our teams and our organizations.

□But the learning — the avoidance of future failures — only comes once they feel okay about themselves after failing. And that feeling comes from empathy.

□Thankfully, the expression of empathy is fairly simple. When someone has made a mistake or slipped up in some way, just listen to them. Don't interrupt, don't offer advice, don't say that it will be all right. And don't be afraid of silence. Just listen.

□And then, after some time, reflect back what you heard them say, what you feel they're feeling. That's it.

□I said simple, not easy. It's hard to just listen and reflect back. It's hard not to give advice or solve a problem. Hard, but worth the effort.

□After some time, Dana got up from the stairs, we all had dinner, and then she went to watch some TV.

□We were talking in the living room when she came in to say good night.

□"How are you feeling?" I asked her.

□"OK, I guess." She shrugged. "I'm still bummed."

□I almost told her not to worry, that it would be OK, that she would feel better in the morning, that there was always the next race, that she had lots of time to practice.

□Almost.

□"I understand," I told her. "It's a bummer."

□\*Names and some details changed