How to Fail Upward

We all make mistakes at work, but even a career flub can be turned into a triumph. Three successful women tell how they did just that.

By Mara Miller

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direction you want to go in the long-

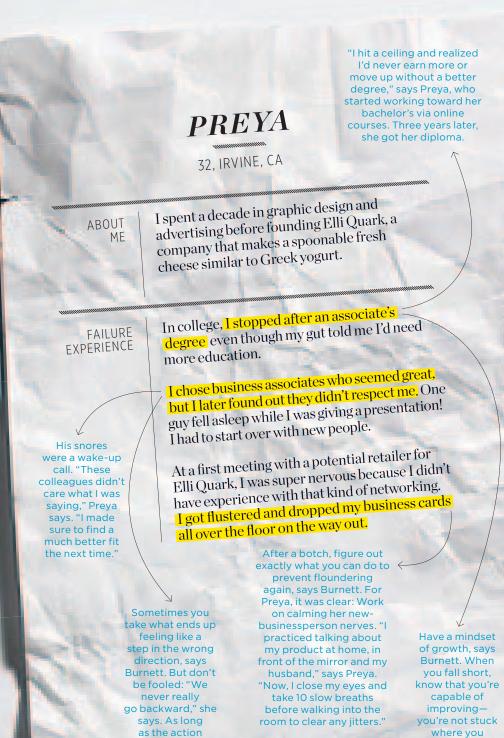
term, it's progress.

There's a reason we hate screwing up: It sucks. "Failure can shake vour whole sense of self-worth," says Jack Matson, a professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and pioneer of a course known as Failure 101. The class's signature assignment: creating "failure résumés" that challenge students to list their not-so-shining moments so they can learn that uh-ohs may lead to eventual wins.

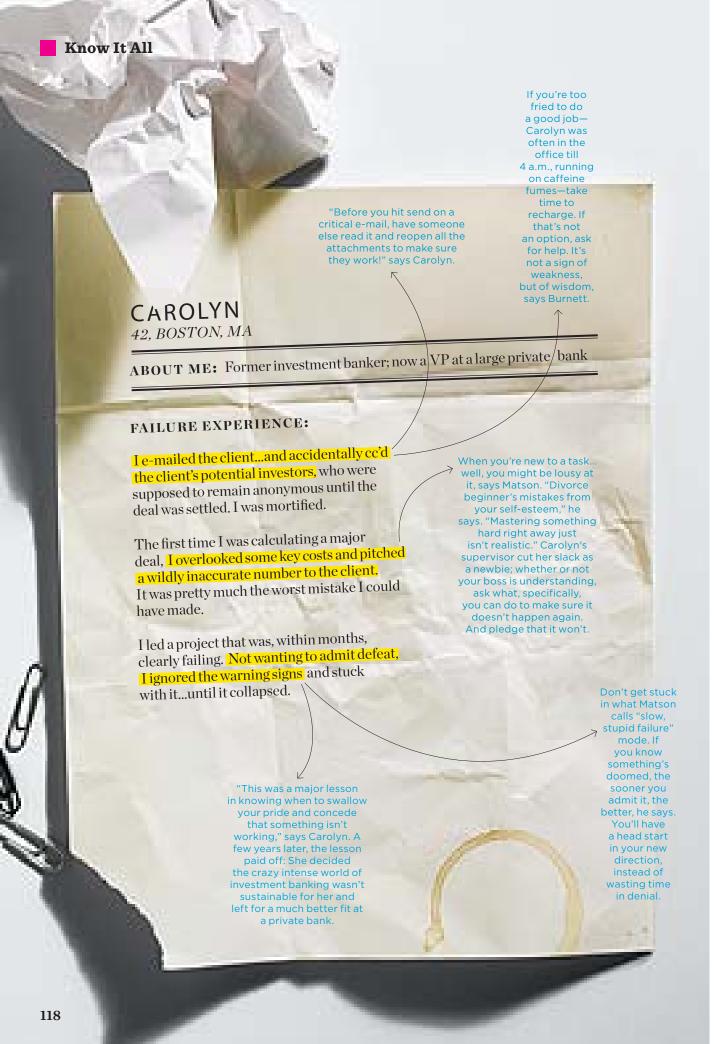
Yes. wins. "You need mistakes for innovation," says Cyndi Burnett, Ed.D., an assistant professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State. "Women often struggle with a fear of failure because we tend to internalize mistakes, while men shrug and move on," she says. "But if you realize the benefits of messing up, your career will go in exciting directions."

We got three brave women to reflect on instances in which they dropped the ball at work. Read on for expert advice on how to turn your own similar mishaps around.

Some names and identifying details have been changed.



are forever.



Mini mistakes can be good for you, says Matson, because if you iron them out early, they help prevent bigger errors later. "That's one of the major benefits of failure," he says "Avoiding moredevastating failure."



Conflict can open your eyes to a colleague's true disposition, says Matson. If you've apologized for your error and there's no cease-fire, ask your boss for advice. It brings her into the loop without painting you as a tattletale.

ABOUT ME

Television director who worked my way up to one of the biggest markets in the country

FAILURE EXPERIENCE

While adjusting to a faster pace at a bigger station, I directed a week's worth of sloppy shows that were riddled with little errors. A colleague commented that I deserved to be directing in the boonies. Ouch.

When applying for a job as senior director, I was passed over in favor of another candidate and offered a lower position instead.

I made a bad first impression with the station's quasi-celeb news anchor when I bolted out of the control room and ran—literally—into him. Even though I apologized, he told my boss I was incompetent and kept bringing it up. It totally shook my confidence.

Quit the Blame Game

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But not so fast:

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"I started reading scripts and practicing cues dozens of times before airdates," says Leslie. "My shows were soon much cleaner."

If you miss out on a promotion, it's no faux pas to ask how to get it next time. It's also fair game, says Matson, to call the hiring manager about an external job you fell short of; just say you want to know what it takes to nab a similar job in the future. Or do some sleuthing: Keep tabs on the company's website to see who got the gig, then compare their qualifications with yours.

Leslie worked on growing a thicker skin—with major payoffs. "I was much more confident with the next big-shot anchor we had," she says. When he confronted her over a miscommunication, "I stuck to my guns and clarified the situation."

"I stuck it out, proved myself, and got the senior director job as soon as the first guy left," says Leslie.