

# 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

There's a reason we hate screwing up: It sucks. "Failure can shake your 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.

## PREYA

32, IRVINE, CA

### ABOUT ME

I spent a decade in graphic design and advertising before founding Elli Quark, a company that makes a spoonable fresh cheese similar to Greek yogurt.

### FAILURE EXPERIENCE

In college, I stopped after an associate's degree even though my gut told me I'd need more education.

I chose business associates who seemed great, but I later found out they didn't respect me. One guy fell asleep while I was giving a presentation! I had to start over with new people.

At a first meeting with a potential retailer for Elli Quark, I was super nervous because I didn't have experience with that kind of networking. I got flustered and dropped my business cards all over the floor on the way out.

His snores were a wake-up call. "These colleagues didn't care what I was saying," Preya says. "I made sure to find a much better fit the next time."

Sometimes you take what ends up feeling like a step in the wrong direction, says Burnett. But don't be fooled: "We never really go backward," she says. As long as the action moves you in the direction you want to go in the long-term, it's progress.

After a botch, figure out exactly what you can do to prevent floundering again, says Burnett. For Preya, it was clear: Work on calming her new-businessperson nerves. "I practiced talking about my product at home, in front of the mirror and my husband," says Preya. "Now, I close my eyes and take 10 slow breaths before walking into the room to clear any jitters."

Have a mindset of growth, says Burnett. When you fall short, know that you're capable of improving—you're not stuck where you are forever.

"I hit a ceiling and realized I'd never earn more or move up without a better degree," says Preya, who started working toward her bachelor's via online courses. Three years later, she got her diploma.

If you're too tired to do a good job—Carolyn was often in the office till 4 a.m., running on caffeine fumes—take time to recharge. If that's not an option, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness, but of wisdom, says Burnett.

"Before you hit send on a critical e-mail, have someone else read it and reopen all the attachments to make sure they work!" says Carolyn.

**CAROLYN**  
42, BOSTON, MA

**ABOUT ME:** Former investment banker; now a VP at a large private bank

**FAILURE EXPERIENCE:**

I e-mailed the client...and accidentally cc'd the client's potential investors, who were supposed to remain anonymous until the deal was settled. I was mortified.

When you're new to a task... well, you might be lousy at it, says Matson. "Divorce beginner's mistakes from your self-esteem," he says. "Mastering something hard right away just isn't realistic." Carolyn's supervisor cut her slack as a newbie; whether or not your boss is understanding, ask what, specifically, you can do to make sure it doesn't happen again. And pledge that it won't.

The first time I was calculating a major deal, I overlooked some key costs and pitched a wildly inaccurate number to the client. It was pretty much the worst mistake I could have made.

I led a project that was, within months, clearly failing. Not wanting to admit defeat, I ignored the warning signs and stuck with it...until it collapsed.

Don't get stuck in what Matson calls "slow, stupid failure" mode. If you know something's doomed, the sooner you admit it, the better, he says. You'll have a head start in your new direction, instead of wasting time in denial.

"This was a major lesson in knowing when to swallow your pride and concede that something isn't working," says Carolyn. A few years later, the lesson paid off: She decided the crazy intense world of investment banking wasn't sustainable for her and left for a much better fit at a private bank.



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.

"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.

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 more-devastating 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.

**Quit the Blame Game**

When you mess up, it's tempting to point fingers. But not so fast: Research shows passing the buck may actually be contagious.

Watching someone else shift responsibility for an error ups people's likelihood of doing the same themselves, reports a *Journal of Experimental Psychology* study.

So, unless you want an office full of not-me's eyeing you next time, own your flub from the get-go.