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The Willingness to Risk Failure

Let me focus for a moment on the willingness to take informed risks. The willingness to risk failure is an essential component of most successful initiatives. The unwillingness to face the risks of failure—or an excessive zeal to avoid all risks—is, in the end, an acceptance of mediocrity and an abdication of leadership. To use a sports metaphor, if you do not come to bat at all, or, when at bat, wait hopefully for a walk, you cannot hit a home run. At best, you can get to first base. Major leaguers can decide to play in the minor leagues, and they may have more hits and fewer failures there, but their impact on the game and on society would be very much diminished. The risk of failure is intrinsic to significant accomplishment. Even the great Babe Ruth struck out almost twice as often as he hit home runs. Successful change depends on experimentation with uncertain results. A willingness to occupy new ground always involves the risk of losing your footing along the way.

We must also beware of raising the flag of failure too quickly. The world too often calls it failure if we do not immediately reach our goals; true failure lies, rather, in giving up on our goals. When 10,000 experiments with a storage battery failed to produce results, Thomas Edison said, “. . . I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” Few battles result in immediate and full victory. For example, instead of being frustrated and immobilized by the continued hardship experienced by many around the world, we must keep alive the idea of eventual deliverance from suffering and oppression by demonstrating our willingness to move forward along those paths actually available to us.

As we begin to prepare for the challenges that will face humanity in the 21st century, we know that we need new ideas and a renewed determination. We face challenges in health care from infancy and childhood to elder care and long-term care. We confront challenges in education, the economy, and the environment. We have an inventory of unfilled aspirations for families and communities and in connecting ourselves to the rest of humankind in a world that becomes ever more interdependent.

If we approach these challenges with a grim determination to avoid risk, we will sentence ourselves to the status quo—or worse. If we rely exclusively on old solutions, we not only will resign our leadership position in economic, political, and cultural affairs, but also will fail to reach our objectives. If our collective fear of failure, our fear of taking the risks of listening to new voices, or our demand for all or nothing immobilizes us, we will achieve little change.

My own observation is that American society has become too risk averse for its own good. Moreover, as individuals become more risk averse in their own lives, they seem to become less and less tolerant of the risks taken by those in leadership positions. We are less tolerant of our leaders’ mistakes and seem increasingly to exhibit a fear of failure even in the face of the compelling national challenges before us. Indeed we often speak of failure as malfeasance and at the same time accuse our leaders of lacking courage and vision. Courage, vision, and change require not only our personal willingness to shoulder the risks of failure, but also our willingness to understand that some failed projects are an inevitable part of the great successes that we hope will characterize the efforts of our leaders.

Let me reflect, for example, on the “failure” of last year’s demonstrations in Beijing. In a certain sense they failed. The daring and courage of these students, workers, and others seem, in the short run, to have produced only a more repressive situation. History, however, has shown us that these seeming failures are often just threads of a larger tapestry; until this tapestry is on the wall, the nature of the final pattern is difficult to discern. Let me be clear, I do not recommend failure. Nor am I attracted to the idea that failure builds character. But a willingness to accept the risk of failure is one of the costs of leadership and, therefore, the price of all success.—HAROLD T. SHAPIRO, *President, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544* [Excerpted from his commencement address, 12 June 1990]