

SES CDP Lessons Learned

There are certain things that future leaders could probably learn from my own failures as I've gone along in my career or things that I've marked as not as successful as they could have been, and one of those things is that I know my personal tendency is to think about things, discuss them with the key players and the movers in the organization, and with my supervisors, but because I tend to be a little bit on the introverted side, I don't necessarily broadcast what I'm thinking about, not because I'm hiding it but because it doesn't strike me to do so. I've learned over the years, but I think advice I would give is that while things are in the planning stages and they're already some what solidified, it's still good to ask a broader array of people than I often do or have done in the past what they think of the pending changes. That's – while saying that, I can say that's a delicate balance because you may want to ask people what their thoughts are, but at the same time, when you talk to too many people a wildfire of gossip can start and rumors about something that is only half-baked because you're still trying to develop the initiative or the response pattern or the process improvement, and that's why you're asking a question, so I would say to very carefully but strategically ask the opinions of more people than I have certain times in the past when I've thought things weren't as successful in the end.

Failure. That's a mixed bag of opportunity and bitter-sweet things that can occur to you. Failure I think is to be avoided if you can possibly avoid it, but when you can't, I think first of all to learn from it, and then after you've learned to adapt and make sure that you don't make that mistake again. That'd be the most important

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thing to do. When it occurs, just recognize that failure will occur. Definitely it's going to occur, and what you need to do is after you've learned from it you need to pick yourself up, dust off, and start again with the new wisdom that you've gained. I think of an example where I was a field supervisor for many years in south Florida and had really wanted to solve an issue, and it's been so long ago I can't even remember what the issue was, but at that time it seemed like a huge issue. It was gonna be a big problem if I didn't get it solved, and I worked on it, spent a lot of personal time on it, spent a lot of staff time on it, worked on it nonstop for about six months, and it became clear that there was no way that I could solve the problem, and I guess pride and desire to solve the problem forced me to work on it so long and so hard without getting help, and when it was about ready to blow up, I knew it was gonna blow up and I wasn't gonna be able to solve it, I made a call to my boss, actually my boss's boss at that time, our Regional Director. Sam Hamilton was Regional Director and is Director of the agency now, and I called him up and I said Sam, this is gonna be bad. It's gonna hit the media. I've tried everything. Here's what I've done, here's who I've talked to. I tried to solve the problem, couldn't get it solved, heads up, I don't know what else to do, and he made a call to one of the State Offices, probably the Governor's Office, I can't really recall at the time, and the problem was solved before the day was over, so the lesson to be learned is you got to recognize that failure isn't necessarily something you can avoid. In that case I couldn't solve the problem because the position I was in didn't possess the amount of authority that it took to solve the problem, and it took someone from a higher position to

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actually solve the problem no matter how much energy I expended. Now is that failure? Well, I guess it's not failure if you can't solve the problem, but I can assure you it was failure that I didn't recognize at six months before and spent all that staff time and all that agony and agency capital working in a situation where the problem wasn't solved. So failure, you need to think about those sorts of things.

I would start by saying I don't think if you're less successful it necessarily means you're a failure. I think if you're any kind of an executive you're gonna be taking risks, you're gonna make thousands of decisions, not all of them are gonna be right, and if you allow yourself to become a nominal risk taker then it's gonna be very difficult to move your organization forward. Any executive has got to be willing to run the risk of failure or being unsuccessful in order to be able to challenge and push the organization, but it's a great opportunity to learn in terms of what you've done. Again, this is a science organization. Part of the role of a scientist is to challenge the status quo, to take some risks, and to conduct some experiments, and sometimes those experiments end up not telling us anything new, but that's part of the process, and until you go through it you don't know, and so the same thing I believe in a leadership position, that you're expected to take some chances, some calculated chances, and manage the risks, and at times it doesn't work out the way that you had anticipated, but that's okay, and I think that's needed so that you have a frame of reference and know where some of the boundaries are and where it is that you can explore some new directions.

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Taking on some difficult assignments, I think that's serving you well. I think also moving around in different organizations. Even when I was in HUD I worked in five or six organizations within HUD. When I came to Interior in 1986, the same thing there. I moved around, and from that I got to learn a lot about government and different styles from other leaders that I encountered. I also learned that it's really important to understand the mission of whatever organization you're in so that you can better support that mission. Most of the jobs that I held were in the administrative management area, and so they weren't direct mission-related work, but it was important for me to invest the time and energy to understand the mission of the organization so that we could better deliver the programs and services in the administrative area.