Knowing how to lose in order to win

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Accepting defeat and learning from your mistakes is the best foundation for testing one's limits and achieving one's objectives.

Friedrich Nietzsche famously said that anything that didn't kill him made him stronger.

In a similar vein, IESE Prof. Santiago Álvarez de Mon asserts that "there is much wisdom, authenticity, humility and freedom contained in the devastating experience of loss."

Through a series of reflections and practical examples laid out in his book, Álvarez de Mon presents defeat as a "crucial and enduring lesson," without which all life experiences are doomed to failure.

The book suggests we can discover our greatest strength in our own fragility, and encourages readers to see life as more than a winner-takes-all contest.

To better understand the concept of loss, Álvarez del Mon draws upon numerous testimonials from individuals who have yet to experience the liberating power of defeat, as well as others who have overcome their fear of losing.

Many of them now realize how much they were losing, when winning was the only acceptable outcome.

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Lessons from losses

The author insists on keeping every setback in perspective, instead of viewing every mistake as a failure.

The sad truth is that, in the face of defeat, most people automatically chastise themselves, often viewing one simple mistake as total failure.

As Álvarez de Mon puts it, they turn a simple human error "into a self-discrediting label, and an adverse circumstance into a distinguishing trait."

Some of the business practitioners and professionals quoted in the book have come to terms with defeat, while others are still "intoxicated" with success, status and power.

In relation to the former, the book tells the story of a brilliant economist and mother of two children who is denied a deserved promotion after requesting more flexible work hours to allow her to combine her career with her maternal duties.

As a result, she embarks on a journey of introspection about her life and relationships, something she otherwise never would have done.

When comparing what she has with what she has lost, she realizes that the balance remains highly favorable. This spurs her to rebuild a successful career elsewhere.

Put simply, power, status and fame can cloud our minds. As exemplified by a quote from Steve Jobs cited in the book, our vision is probably clearer without such distractions.

"I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."

Life is not a competition

At the root of our obsession with winning or losing is the all-too- prevalent notion of competition.

Yet, as the author points out, "life is more than a tournament, or a game of cards, or a battle, or a heated negotiation, or a platform to showcase ourselves, or a confrontation in which we wipe out our opponent."

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To persuade and engage the other party, we must first listen to him or her. And humility should be our main weapon of choice.

"We gain visibility and ascendancy when we give space to others. An individual's growth is tied to the development of others," says Álvarez de Mon.

One of the book's main figures is a born competitor, a winner who has been reared on high expectations and ambitious goals, and who now must come to terms with defeat.

In his case, life is all about status, salary and constant advancement. In the author's opinion, only when he learns how to lose will he find himself and discover his true identity.

As Álvarez de Mon asserts, the future will be brighter if we can only recognize that we are no longer riding on the crest of the wave.

Our own worst enemy is "living within, nestled into the deepest recesses of our consciousness."

Change means adopting new behaviors, repeating them with discipline and perseverance until they become new habits.

Focusing on the course, not the finish line

Life is not all about achieving goals imposed and recognized by others. It's about recognizing and conquering our essence.

Hence, Álvarez de Mon asserts that learning how to lose is an invaluable test. "Even the brightest in the class end up making that realization."

Another professional featured in the book hits rock bottom when he loses his son after a long battle with disease. Since then, no other defeat scares him. He and his wife can only win now, as they have already lost the most prized thing in their lives.

In this case, there are three undeniable truths.

First, the phenomenon of change is an inseparable part of being human.

Second, anyone who suffers such a terrible loss is now freer and more independent, no longer trapped by the fears and mental reservations that plague many people.

Third, people normally emerge from such ordeals both wiser and better.

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Living life to the fullest requires accepting and learning from defeat. "Without the contrast it presents, victory loses its luster, and stupidity binds us to our more capricious ego," says the author.

Ironically, we have more chances of winning if we come to terms with the potential downside. Unburdened of the obligation to always win, we feel freer on the inside.

"Win, lose, who knows? Getting out there is what matters! And along the way, awakening, breathing, thinking, feeling, conversing, learning, cooperating, meditating, flowing, serving, loving. These are the most important verbs of a good life," says Álvarez de Mon.

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