

**HOW TO BECOME
A TOTAL FAILURE**

The Ten Rules of
Highly Unsuccessful People



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*This book is dedicated to our daughters
and their success: Lea, Kayla, Candice,
Alicia, Chelsea, and Shyanne.*

The Rules *for* Failure

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Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself why it is so much easier to fail than to succeed? Success requires dedication, effort, and a willingness to continually learn. Most of the skills we learn for success and failure are typically acquired from our childhood experiences. As youngsters, we are so loaded with decisions about life that we are bound to program a few that are detrimental to our success. We define these as *The Rules for Failure*.

For example, have you ever watched kids in a nursery? If a kid wants a toy, he or she walks over and takes it from someone playing with it. Decision time! The kid who was playing with the toy either takes action to retrieve it or sits there and cries; fight or flight. If crying is the choice, the kid who took the toy may decide, “Whenever I want something, I simply take it.” This is a variation of Rule #4: Always look out for Number One. Although this decision might appear, at the time, to be a rule for success, it eventually becomes a rule for failure.

By the time we are thirteen years old, we’ve just about mastered the rules we believe are essential to get what we want in life—but not necessarily the rules to ensure our success. The rules to get what we want serve as the basis for the behavioral patterns (and skills) we begin to perfect for navigating life.

The point is, we begin to learn a selected set of skills for failing fairly early in life. Every time we attempt to avoid responsibility for what we do,

selfishly manipulate our parents, throw temper tantrums to get our way, and get what we want with the least amount of effort, then we are establishing a pattern of behavior that will ultimately lead to failure. Having learned from experience, our parents attempt to teach us the long-term consequences of such behavioral patterns, which are not in our best interests. Sometimes, we listen and learn. And sometimes we don't.

Armed with our storehouse of wisdom, we are thrust upon the school system. Their job is to teach us the skills for success. The problem is we've already perfected many of the skills for failure! So teachers have the dual challenge of helping us unlearn our pattern of failure *and* simultaneously teaching us skills for success; such as honesty, hard work, sharing, and most of all, how to get along with others. You can understand why our school system is in such a mess today. Not primarily because of teachers or the system but because of our preconditioning before we even enter the hallowed halls of learning.

The Rules *for* Failure (The Rules) are reinforced through competition for grades, participation in cliques, and the general acceptance and glorification of antisocial behavior. The Rules appear to be such an ingrained part of life that by the time we enter the world of work we use them without a second thought. They become such a natural part of our day-to-day behaviors that we are honestly surprised when someone calls attention to the fact that gossip is injurious to others, that hoarding information undermines

productivity, or resistance to new learning is the quickest way to put the organization out of business—and ourselves out of a job.

The Rules are so socially acceptable that being a proponent for success is almost a radical idea. In practice, The Rules appear to be innocent and well-meaning, but in fact are personally self-serving. Let's get started with our examination of how The Rules are used in "real life" situations. We warn you in advance, we will use "tongue in cheek" comments to keep the conversations and the stories humorous. The ultimate objective is to reassess the long-term value of The Rules *for* Failure and learn how to transform them into The Rules *for* Success.

Rule #1:

Resist learning anything new that could lead to more responsibility —

*The more you learn,
the more people will expect.*



Rule #1: Resist Learning Anything New

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON EXAMPLES OF RULE #1 is organizations where employees are resistant to new learning. As workplace demands increase in terms of speed, efficiency, and quality, workers feel greater pressure to do more work in less time; and to do so with less management. This is called empowerment.¹ If, in fact, workers don't learn new skills for workplace efficiency, then empowerment *does* become more work in less time. In this situation, the strategy for failure in dealing with greater workplace responsibility is Rule #1: resist new learning and create a smoke screen where empowerment itself *appears* to be the problem. Effective smoke screens include the suggestion that training takes employees away from their real work and it's simply a waste of time or that leadership is trying to get more out of workers without extra pay; which in some cases may have validity! Let's visit a few stories to learn the consequences of resisting new learning by using Rule #1.



The following story was shared by a friend during her early days of managing. It involves her best effort at running a franchise business during the rapid integration of information technology (IT). This is an excellent example of the application of Rule #1, and its rather unsuccessful resulting consequences.

¹*Empowerment* is the ability to perform with the least amount of supervision.

E-Filing? What a Dumb Idea!

When I was just getting started in the printing business, one of my part-time employees came to me with the idea of offering e-file taxes for our customers. This was back in 1990 before the Internet age. If he had come to me a few years later, I might have been more open-minded. But I had no idea how to send documents over a phone line. "It's simple," he said, pointing to the small computer screen. "You just click this button and the computer breaks up all the data into tiny little 1s and 0s, fires them across the telephone line, and the computer on the other end reassembles the pieces into the tax return you see right here." His whole idea sounded wishy-washy to me, too Star Trekky. I told him that we were not in the tax filing business and dismissed the idea. He persisted, saying that our customers come to us to make copies of their tax returns every year so why couldn't we help them file their forms faster? "They'll get their money faster. Don't you think people will pay for that?" "No," I said. "I think people will think we're nuts, but even if they do think we can send their tax returns over a phone line to the IRS, they won't trust us having their private information sent in some hocus pocus fashion. And I don't want to take on that responsibility. Do you?" Before he could respond, I said, "You should just drop the whole idea."

But instead of dropping his idea, he drove down to our corporate headquarters in Albuquerque and somehow got the CEO to listen to him. I have never been so angry in my life and I was planning on firing him when he returned. I couldn't believe a part-time employee would have the nerve to disrespect me so

Rule #1: Resist Learning Anything New

blatantly. When he returned, I called him into my office. But before I could tell him he was fired, he told me the CEO wanted to test the e-filing idea in our store. “What?” I yelled. “First you go down there without my permission—after I told you to drop the idea—and now you want me to help you test it? Did you ever think what would happen to me if your cute little idea doesn’t work?” The guy just stood there grinning like an idiot; and his pimples didn’t help. He was too naïve to understand how easy it was to lose a job and he didn’t have a family he was trying to support. The bad news is we tested the idea and actually made money. The good news is the other 137 franchise partners in the organization voted to reject the service. The whole e-filing idea died a good democratic death, at least as a service provided by our company.

This story illustrates the fear we experience when new information technology (IT) and computer software have to be learned. In this case, the manager’s first objection to the new idea was the responsibility she would have if something happened to a customer’s tax information. The second reason for her opposition to the new idea was that she might look bad if it failed and would lose her job. These are both superficial objections that were used to hide her *real* fear—the necessity to learn the new IT competencies and skills required for implementing the new e-filing idea. The eventual consequence was that over time she lost credibility in the organization and ultimately she lost her job as manager for being risk-averse.

Too often we let our fear of new learning, and possibly more responsibility, lead us down a road to failure.



Let's take a look at what often happens on the home front when we're just learning how to master the skill of avoiding new learning and greater responsibility.

I Don't Know How to Make French Toast

A few months ago, I offered to make breakfast for my wife and four daughters. They were delighted, so I did my breakfast specialty: scrambled eggs, bacon, and wheat toast, just to add a healthy touch. One of my daughters, Angela, who marches to her own drummer, commented that she wanted French toast. I told her that it would be easier if she had bacon and eggs. She just looked at me and stated that she had no interest in bacon and eggs. She went on to point out that wheat bread made no healthy difference because of the grease I was using. I finally said, "Fine. Why don't you make it yourself?" She began to whine that she didn't know how to make French toast. I tried to be funny by replying that making French toast was a survival skill that every kid should learn. She rolled her eyes, let out a resigned "Puh-lease!" and said she wasn't interested in learning, just eating. However, she did agree to put up with my cooking class. Copying the techniques of the *Emeril* cooking show from T.V., I walked her through the mastery process of preparing French toast, while she watched with a disinterested look. About this time

Rule #1: Resist Learning Anything New

my oldest daughter walked into the kitchen and asked what was going on. When I told her about my cooking class in French toast, she laughed and said, “What are you talking about? Angela makes French toast all the time.” So much for my household heroics. Angela took the plate and said, “Thanks for teaching me the *new* survival skill.”

In spite of the attitude our kids might use sometimes to avoid new learning, we have to be vigilant in teaching them anyway; even when they might be putting us on! They might not appreciate us now, but they will in the future. There’s a running debate about how much we influence our children’s habits and how much they are influenced by their friends. I think we are lucky if it’s fifty-fifty. No matter what we expect their school to teach them, we are 100% responsible for preparing them for the world they will encounter when they grow up. We can only do so by becoming credible examples of the expectations we have of them. Remember, we influence them most by what we *do*, not by what we *say*.



Our concluding example involving the mastery of avoiding new learning is the story of Casey, whose job was to keep an eye on things. This job description is perfectly suited for the application of Rule #1.

My Job is To Keep an Eye on Things

I once worked as an assistant manager for a family printing business. The owner, Helen, spent most of her time in an inner office. This was her idea of running an empowered operation. Helen's husband, Casey, worked customer service with a crew of teenage staff. The staff mostly sat around and read novels except when interrupted by customers during periods of high demand. Casey was a nice guy, fun to talk with during slow spells, but when things got busy he just hung out by one of the machines talking to no one in particular. Sometimes I'm not sure he even noticed that no one was listening to him because we were too busy helping customers and running jobs. On occasion his wife, Helen, would make an appearance just to let us know she was alive and well.

One day I finally had enough of Casey's goofing off. I didn't care if Helen fired me or not. I figured I could always drop out of college and fry burgers or something. While running three machines simultaneously and trying to politely pay attention to one of Casey's rambling stories, I stopped and asked, "Casey, would you mind running one of these jobs so I can work on the other two that have just come in?" "Sorry," he said, "I don't know how to run this machine." *Ah-ha*, I thought. *Now I've got him*. "It's really easy," I replied. "Here, let me show you." "No, it's okay," Casey said, still standing with his elbow propped on the machine I wanted him to operate. "You don't need to show me." "Why not?" I asked, about ready to explode. "Well," Casey said, "if you teach me how to run the machine then everyone will expect me to run it all the time and that's not what

Rule #1: Resist Learning Anything New

Helen wants me to do.” I was stunned. “What *does* Helen want you to do?” I asked. “I’m supposed to keep an eye on things while she’s running her office, Casey said. “But she’s the only one in the office!” I almost shouted. Casey replied, “That’s exactly what I mean. She can’t do everything you know.” He just stood there staring at me as if what he just said made perfect sense. I just walked away and started to make plans for a new job. While Casey kept an eye on things, Helen sat in her office, and the crew read their novels, our customers did a disappearing act!

This story highlights the challenges small businesses face in today’s competitive business environment. The fact is, small businesses are subject to the same rules of business operation as large organizations. By comparison, many large business franchises operate exactly like Helen and Casey’s organization. The fundamental rule for any business—large or small—is when continuous learning stops, extinction quickly sets in.

Conclusion

The point of each of these stories is that new learning, one way or the other, is unavoidable. After all, the most important asset you have where work is concerned is your competency. Competency refers to your total set of skills, talents, and learned experiences. We refer to this asset as your “personal stock.” By comparison to the Stock Market, the higher your personal stock, the greater value you have. Conversely, the less competent you

Bill and Phil

are, the less value you have in the world of work. This simple analogy shows clearly that resistance to new learning is ultimately a prescription for failure. The ultimate realization for success is to adopt a mind-set that continuous learning is a requirement for continuous employment.