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Success Or Failure? You Choose!

BY DAVID NELSON

I met Eldon in a federal prison where he is now part of an 18-month residential program, providing him life skills, a deeper spiritual grounding, and hope.

Eldon tried his best, yet never seemed to be able to achieve the success he desired. He grew up in a small apartment in a large

city. He never knew his birth father. He had been told only that his father is a convicted felon. His mother had a series of men in her life but never married any of them. Several of the men abused Eldon and his two sisters.

At the age of 11, Eldon ran away for the first time. As a young teenager, he was arrested for possession of drugs and attempting to sell small amounts to his friends on the street. He saw some of the older boys and men in his neighborhood drive nice cars, dress in expensive clothes, and flash rolls of money. That looked like a good life compared to the poverty he shared with his mother and sisters. He loved his sisters and would sometimes steal candy bars for them so they would not go to sleep hungry.



I met Marissa in a Head Start Center where her three children spend almost eight hours of the day while Mom works.

Marissa is a single parent with three pre-school children, all with different fathers. She works at McDonalds for minimum wage and manages to get by in their small rental. She, like the two generations before her, had children almost as soon as she could. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. She wanted love, and who could give more love than a baby who needed so much attention?

As an Appreciative Inquiry Coach, I have shared a different vision with Eldon and Marissa, and both are responding in an exciting way. These two, and so many others, have spent time looking at failure. They have been assisted by governmental and non-governmental agencies to study the effects of their bad decisions and foolish choices. Both have learned a lot about failure.

What Marissa and Eldon have taught me, however, is something entirely different and very exciting. I asked them to tell me about their successes. At first they seemed surprised and even shocked I would be interested in them and in their good behavior, but they quickly responded with stories of success. Eldon made some good friends on the street, in a local community center, and in a neighborhood mosque. Marissa learned excellent homemaking skills in her high school. When they started telling stories about success, something seemed to shift in their thinking.

Success and failure are not opposites. They are different. When you study failure, you can learn a great deal about why it happened, when it happened, and what the steps were in the process. But you can't expect to learn too much about success by studying failure. When you study success, you learn about the dynamics that went into success. You discover the mental processes that gave direction. You identify inner strengths that can be recognized and nurtured. You learn about success by studying it.

If this paradigm shift works for my friends on the edges of society, I am convinced it also has possibilities for others. If you run a dental office or manage a staff, think about the times you were really successful. Why did it work? Who was involved? What steps created completion and a positive outcome? What can you take from this success to create more good things in your office or staff? If you are working on a skill, this same technique can

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be used. How do you learn from success in order to create more success?

I know there are those who value their ability to solve problems and “put out fires.” If that is your leadership gift, there will always be places where you are needed. But if you are like me, and prefer harmony in the workplace and appreciate an office where people not only get along but actually enjoy coming to work and hanging out with each other, perhaps it is time to learn the lesson Eldon and Marissa taught me. Failures and successes are not the opposites of each other. They are different. We can try to do our best and learn from our mistakes, but we will learn even more from our successes.

You might begin each staff meeting with the sharing of a success from this past week. Instead of interviewing unhappy customers, interview customers who have been thrilled with your service. Bring them in to tell their stories to the staff. It will enable them to feel even better about your office and it will create great learning opportunities for the rest of the staff.

We can’t control the future, but we can increase the possibilities of satisfaction when we choose to explore success. 

Dr. David Nelson is an “Appreciative Inquiry Coach.” The Human Agenda.

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