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CAIAIMAGE/ANDY ROBERTS/GETTY IMAGES

A client (who I'll call "Alex") asked me to help him prepare to interview for a CEO role with a start-up. It was the first time he had interviewed for the C-level, and when we met, he was visibly agitated. I asked what was wrong, and he explained that he felt "paralyzed" by his fear of failing at the high-stakes meeting.

Digging deeper, I discovered that Alex's concern about the quality of his performance stemmed from a "setback" he had experienced and internalized while working at his previous company. As I listened to him describe the situation, it became clear that the failure was related to his company and

outside industry factors, rather than to any misstep on his part. Despite that fact, Alex could not shake the perception that he himself had not succeeded, even though there was nothing he could have logically done to anticipate or change this outcome.

People are quick to blame themselves for failure, and companies hedge against it even if they pay lip service to the noble concept of trial and error. What can you do if you, like Alex, want to face your fear of screwing up and push beyond it to success? Here are four steps you can take:

Redefine failure. Behind many fears is worry about doing something wrong, looking foolish, or not meeting expectations — in other words, fear of failure. By framing a situation you're dreading differently before you attempt it, you may be able to avoid some stress and anxiety.

Let's go back to Alex as an example of how to execute this. As he thought about his interview, he realized that his initial bar for failing the task — “not being hired for the position” — was perhaps too high given that he'd never been a CEO and had never previously tried for that top job. Even if his interview went flawlessly, other factors might influence the hiring committee's decision — such as predetermined preferences on the part of board members.

In coaching Alex through this approach, I encouraged him to redefine how he would view his performance in the interview. Was there a way he might interpret it differently from the get-go and be more open to signs of success, even if they were small? Could he, for example, redefine failure as not being able to answer *any* of the questions posed or receiving specific negative feedback? Could he redefine success as being able to answer each question to the best of his ability and receiving no criticisms about how he interviewed?

As it turned out, Alex did advance to the second round and was complimented on his preparedness. Ultimately, he did not get the job. But because he had shifted his mindset and redefined what constituted failure and success, he was able to absorb the results of the experience more gracefully and with less angst than he had expected.

Set approach goals (not avoidance goals). Goals can be classified as [approach goals](#) or [avoidance goals](#) based on whether you are motivated by wanting to achieve a positive outcome or avoid an adverse one. Psychologists have found that creating approach goals, or positively reframing avoidance goals, is beneficial for well-being. When you're dreading a tough task and expect it to be difficult and unpleasant, you may unconsciously set goals around what you *don't* want to happen rather than what you do want.

Though nervous about the process, Alex's desire to become a CEO was an approach goal because it focused on what he wanted to achieve in his career rather than what he hoped to avoid. Although he didn't land the first CEO job he tried to get, he did not let that fact deter him from keeping that as his objective and getting back out there.

If Alex had instead become discouraged about the outcome of his first C-level interview and decided to actively avoid the pain of rejection by never vying for the top spot again, he would have shifted from approach to avoidance mode. While developing an avoidance goal is a common response to a perceived failure, it's important to keep in mind the costs of doing so. Research has shown that employees who take on an [avoidance focus](#) become twice as mentally fatigued as their approach-focused colleagues.

Create a “fear list.” Author and investor [Tim Ferriss](#) recommends “fear-setting,” creating a checklist of what you are afraid to do and what you fear will happen if you do it. In his [Ted Talk](#) on the subject, he shares how doing this enabled him to tackle some of his hardest challenges, resulting in some of his biggest successes.

I asked Alex to make three lists: first, the worst-case scenarios if he bombed the interview; second, things he could do to prevent the failure; and third, in the event the flop occurred, what could he do to repair it. Next, I asked him to write down the benefits of the attempted effort and the cost of inaction. This exercise helped him realize that although he was anxious, walking away from the opportunity would be more harmful to his career in the long run.

Focus on learning. The chips aren't always going to fall where you want them to — but if you understand that reality going in, you can be prepared to wring the most value out of the experience, no matter the outcome.

To return to Alex, he was able to recognize through the coaching process that being hyper-focused on his previous company's flop — and overestimating his role in it — caused him to panic about the CEO interview. When he shifted gears to focus not on his potential for failure but on what he would learn from competing at a higher level than he had before, he stopped sweating that first attempt and was able to see it as a steppingstone on a longer journey to the CEO seat. With that mindset, he quickly pivoted away from his disappointment at not getting the offer to quickly planning for the next opportunity to interview for a similar role at another company.

Remember: it's when you feel comfortable that you should be fearful, because it's a sign that you're not stepping far enough out of your comfort zone to take steps that will help you rise and thrive. By rethinking your fears using the four steps above, you can come to see apprehension as a teacher and guide to help you achieve your most important goals.

Susan Peppercorn is an executive career transition coach and speaker. She is the author of [Ditch Your Inner Critic at Work: Evidence-Based Strategies to Thrive in Your Career](#). Numerous publications including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fast Company, the Boston Globe, and SELF Magazine have tapped her for career advice. You can download her free [Career Fit Self-Assessment](#) and [25 Steps to a Successful Career Transition](#).
