



## *What Is Failure in the Context of Supervision?*

# Philosophical reverie

*I was puzzled about the concept of failure in the context of supervision, as this is one of the professions, which is entirely based on reflection and learning. What does it mean then, when a supervisor is talking about failure? And how does this word end up in our professional vocabulary at all?*

### ■ Helena Ehrenbusch

I am puzzled about the concept of failure in the context of supervision, as this is one of the professions, which is entirely based on reflection and meta-reflection. In my world, reflection is a tool to explore ourselves and get insights into our perspectives, and interactions. Reflection is about learning how to be solely human beings in the

impermanent world, where truth has a relative position and every experience is a possible way of being. The concept of failure, in turn, indicates that there are right and wrong ways of doing, thinking and being. Failure brings in polarisation, evaluation, the complexity of the human soul, emotions, and constructions within. Logic says, that the word “failure” cannot exist in the vocabulary of the supervisor.

At first I delved into linguistics to get guidance. Oxford Learner’s Dictionary<sup>1</sup> follows the path of polarisation - “failure” means “not successful”. As a coach, I might say it makes sense. For example, if an athlete is setting the goal to win the competition, and then doesn’t, she fails. But what if the coach sets the goal to win and the athlete fails, who is failing then? Did the coach set the right goal, or was the athlete not aware of the goal, or did they fail to evaluate, what it takes to reach the goal? (You are welcome to change the word “athlete” with “client”.) So I understand, that setting and achieving a goal, to succeed or fail, is seemingly a simple task, easily measured by “yes” or “no”, but being human is, fortunately, more polyvalent. There are many areas, where goal setting can be made on a “black or white” basis, like sports, politics, banking or similar, but how does it help to learn? We do live in a competing “winning-is-everything” society, which makes failure generally a huge fiasco. The question is, what can supervisor do with this knowledge? Can or should supervision step out of such world cognition? Would it make our service more qualitative or rather disconnected from the reality around us?

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/failure?q=failure>

Merriam Dictionary<sup>2</sup> gives me more hints. Failure is an “omission of occurrence or performance”, “failing to perform a duty or expected action”, or “lack of success”. Failing to perform a duty makes me think, that perhaps the supervisor was sick, did not show up or had a nervous breakdown. Theoretically, it is possible to fail to perform an expected action, but doesn't it contain too many variables to make such a plain conclusion? For example, the most important action could be to create a safe space. If in this case, the client is showing negative emotions towards the supervisor, does it mean, the supervisor failed in her task or was she extremely successful, because the client felt safe enough to show these emotions? Does this kind of evaluation then have any relevance in the context of supervision, or who is qualified to evaluate the success rate? Is it at all the supervisors' role to answer the expectations? Lack of success raises the question, how much does supervision depend on success at all, or is more about education, experiences, and learning?

After the linguistic trip, I decided to dig in my memory to remember, at which moments did my colleagues bring up the word “failure” though most often I have heard my supervision students using it.

### **Fear of failure ahead**

This is more common for novice supervisors, as I also recall myself in my first years being terrified, if I fail in the meetings with my supervisees, before I even met them or got any idea, what is going to happen. But it is not rare also among the more experienced supervisors. Probably this is the most understandable fear, though the causes have a very wide range. To start with the historic-developmental reasons, people should be more cautious about

<sup>2</sup><https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/failure>

the unknown. As a novice professional, you might be afraid if you can work with people, remember the structure, and recall the proper action at the right moment. This might come from just a lack of experience and in a way, it is even healthy to be a bit insecure, or better – in the not knowing position.

### **Lack of preparation for failure is the most common reason behind the fears.**

The fear of failing might indicate a lack of self-confidence, self-awareness, gaps in learning (theoretical knowledge) or the general attitude of the “winners” society. Unfortunately, very few people have the following attitude: “It is so exciting – I can go and try out my new skills to see, if and how they work!” I have met such an attitude more among coaches, psychologists, but not often in supervision. But I also have not seen study programs, where failure is a focal point for learning, except in my other profession – clowning. The school system generally teaches us, that failure is not learning, but rather a punishment – to fail a test makes you an outcast, and we do carry this understanding along.

### **The immediate reaction of a client**

The very general goal and understanding are, that any counselling process is successful, when the client gets a happy mood, satisfaction, and a deep understanding of his problematic situation or life goal, and is moving on as a changed person. Firstly, it puts a lot of pressure on the supervisor being in the role of omnipotent fixer. People would often rather be fixed by something outside than connect with the inner self that might be too frightening, too much energy consuming and not always nice. Secondly, such thinking makes people forget that changes arise over time, not just here and now miraculously. To change something, to learn, to develop, means self-discipline and focus, and it is not always pleasant, or easy to

take the role of such a guide. We are not enough prepared to accept negative feedback, to be a container, to understand the concept of time and space.

### **The exaggerated focus on minor errors**

A supervisor might have done a good work (the goal was achieved, people gave adequate feedback or similar), but she forgets a minor detail (to bring tissues but the client started to cry; to perform one part of a central exercise, etc.) and this relates to the feeling of failure. It can mean, that people who come to study supervision, might just be more perfectionism-minded and achievement-oriented, whose world view generally might be labelled through successes and failures. Such people might often evaluate themselves (and sometimes also their colleagues) in a hardcore bullying way.

### **Fear of having not enough good or new exercises for the process**

In my experience, this is a very popular reason for calling one's experience a failure. Maybe people think, that supervisors must always find a proper exercise for every

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problem or goal the client brings. A word that comes to my mind is consumerism, which is maybe weird in the context of supervision, but a possible explanation. The successful supervisor has the biggest and shiniest toolbox! It does make supervision a marketing product, but I do understand, this philosophy is gathering more popularity. By the way, supervision is by far the only discipline where I have spotted such a tendency.

I am glad, that through my reverie I did not reach the “one-and-only” correct answer. It supports my understanding, that supervisors should be able to ask questions in every situation and welcome the state of uncertainty not to get stuck in pansophism. I would like to see the supervision training programs integrating the concept of failure or clowning into the curricula, so could supervision as a discipline gain in quality and prestige. My conclusion comes from Charlie Chaplin: “Failure is unimportant. It takes courage to make a fool of yourself” ■



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