

"... it's terrific!"

Warren Bennis, author of
On Becoming a Leader

How Executives Fail

25 Surefire Recipes for
Sabotaging Your Career

James O'Toole:
"Absolutely
Brilliant!"

Lee Thayer



Author of
Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing

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*How Executives Fail:
25 Surefire Recipes for Sabotaging Your Career*

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Praise for *How Executives Fail*:

“Habit is a great deadener and this book will help you break the ones that could fatally end your career (and ambitions!). The best ‘insurance’ book on leadership I’ve read.”

– **Warren Bennis**,
Distinguished Professor of Business,
University of Southern California,
Author of *On Becoming a Leader*

“Every few centuries, in every field of study, someone arises whose insights dwarf those of his or her peers. Lee Thayer is one of them. His work and his name will be remembered for centuries to come. As Einstein eclipsed Newton, Thayer eclipses Machiavelli. His seminal thinking on leadership is the foundation for all that I have done at Johnsonville Sausage.”

– **Ralph C. Stayer**, CEO
Johnsonville Sausage

“With characteristic insight, Lee Thayer tells us there are two ways to succeed: ‘get lucky and avoid failure.’ (Absolutely brilliant!) Since you can’t learn luck, Thayer offers his readers a baker’s two dozen ways to ‘fail on purpose’ in this original, funny, and useful little gem of a book. Smart executives will sneak peeks at its *ironically* practical pages when no one is looking.”

– **James O’Toole**, author of
Creating the Good Life

“Lee Thayer has taken many people on the journey of thinking about how we think. *How Executives Fail* is another example of Lee’s verbal ‘whack upside the head’ to listen to ourselves. He has us look at how we deal with reality. He questions our thought processes. Am I getting in touch with reality or am I coming up with a host of excuses and explanations masquerading as fact?”

– **Austin “Ozzie” Gontang**, Ph.D.
Group Chair, Vistage International, Inc.

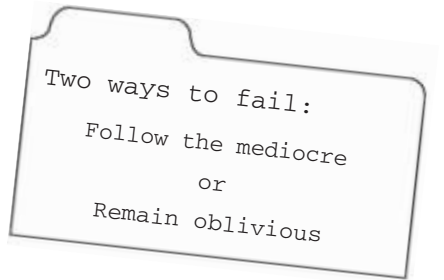
Overview

For all those who would presume to manage a human enterprise, there are two ways of succeeding: One is to get lucky. The other is to avoid failing.

It may seem perverse, but there are also two ways of failing:

One is to follow one's peers lemming-like down the slippery slope of mediocrity.

The other is to be oblivious to what part of the problem you are.



What is *common* to all situations is not the likelihood of success, but the likelihood of failure. The everyday rate of any real success on the part of managers and executives seems to bear no correlation to the exponential flood of advice about “how to succeed.”

This little book of recipes about how to fail as a manager or executive turns that flood of advice about how to succeed on its head. The indispensable factor

is not a list of explanations about how somebody succeeded. The indispensable factor is simply that of avoiding failure – avoiding the kind of thinking and actions that make failure likely.

There isn't a manager alive who couldn't use this book to advantage.

Hardly anyone sets out to fail. But most managers and executives do fail. They fail their own hopes and aspirations, if not their roles. How do they *do* this? By the time they figure out by trial and error what part of the problem they are, it's usually too late.

This little book is the only instruction book you'll ever need about how to avoid failing by default. You'll learn how to fail on purpose, with dash and aplomb. You'll meet many familiar people - people you will immediately recognize – in these pages. Here and there, you might catch a glimpse of yourself.

Think of it as failure therapy. What you can't learn here about your personal talents for failing you'll just have to learn the hard way. By doing so. If you don't have insight into how executives fail, you're likely to end up where you don't want to go.

Enjoy this small book of collected wisdom about how to fail. Each "recipe" is drawn from universals of real life – how most managers and executives have failed in spite of their best intentions.

*It takes some people all their lives
to become failures, while others
achieve it in just a few years.*

– American folklore

Irony: *“a state of affairs or an event
that seems deliberately contrary
to what one expects
and is often amusing as a result.”*

– The New Oxford American Dictionary

*“How many people are trapped
in their everyday habits:
part numb, part frightened, part indifferent?
To have a better life we must
keep choosing how we’re living.”*

– Albert Einstein

Overview

page i

By Way of an Introduction

page 1

Annotated Recipe List

[This book is not composed of chapters that continue on from the previous. It consists of short pieces—5 to 8 pages—that I call “recipes.” These can be read one at a time profitably—by choice or by happenstance. These annotated titles will provide the reader with all the clues needed to get into and gain from the book, and are largely self-explanatory.]

Recipe #1

How to Breed Failure from Success

Most executives have had some success, though their explanations are fanciful. They often attempt to apply their previous success paradigms to successively different circumstances until they ultimately fail.

page 7

Recipe #2

How to Achieve Mediocrity

Mediocrity is the mostly unintended destination where most executives end up. This recipe informs them how to get to that destination more *efficiently*.

page 15

Recipe #3

How to Develop
Your Own Incompetence

Sometimes (although increasingly less so), you have to be incompetent in order to fail. Here are all of the obvious “secrets” about how to foster your own incompetence.

page 21

Recipe #4

How to Nourish
Incompetence in Others

You have to be reasonably incompetent yourself in order to nourish this condition in others. This recipe tells you how to surround yourself with incompetents, who can then become indispensable to your own failure.

page 29

Recipe #5

How to Be the
Measure of All Things

People who are on the path to failure make themselves the measure of the universe. They judge everything from their own limited perspective. Here’s how to get better at it.

page 35

Recipe #6

How to Maintain Your Gullibility

Being more than ordinarily gullible can contribute mightily to your eventual failure. You may be moderately gullible. But it's over-confidence in one's own power of mind that opens one to extreme gullibility – to toadying, for example.

page 41

Recipe #7How to Be Tolerant of
Those Who Can't, or Won't

There are people who *can't* perform even up to their own standards. There are others who *won't* perform. Not being able to distinguish the one from the other, or being exceedingly tolerant of both, will make a significant contribution to your failure.

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Recipe #8

How to Get Addicted

People who travel the road to failure are addicted. They are addicted to themselves, to their own sense of always being right, and to other conditions of their lives. The more addicted you can get to always being right, the more certain you are to fail.

page 53

Recipe #9

How to Be Reasonable

Being overly-reasonable, like being overly unreasonable (depends on about what, doesn't it?), can fuel and inspire the trip to failure. Learn how with this recipe.

page 59

Recipe #10

How to Fake Other People Out

It is commonplace in our culture to fake other people out – to make them think you are somehow better than you are. To do that, you have to deceive yourself about yourself. Here's how to do that expeditiously.

page 65

Recipe #11

How to Fill Your Day
with Unimportant Things

Ineffective executives are not necessarily dumber than others. They simply do a terrible job of sorting out what's really important from what's not. Sometimes they mistake what *they* think is important for what *is* important.

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Recipe #12

How to Be Indecisive

Jumping to conclusions based on past experience certainly helps if you want to fail. But being indecisive when decisiveness is called for will also help. You can often avoid accountability by being indecisive. Here are tried-and-true techniques for doing that.

page 77

Recipe #13

How to Be Able Not to Think

Real success is often associated with a superior ability to think. So here are some lessons for being able *not* to think, and thus avoiding success.

page 83

Recipe #14

How to Avoid Being Accountable

Executives who will fail frequently try to hide when the heat's on, or when they might be too obviously wrong (or right). A flurry of activity may mislead a stupid boss or customer into believing you're actually accomplishing something.

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Recipe #15

How to Grow and Enhance

Bad Habits

Bad habits are the ones you need to fail. They're easy to come by and comfortable to exercise. They're frequently referred to as your "comfort zone."

page 95

Recipe #16

How to Miscast People -
Including Yourself

The commonest error of all is that of miscasting. If you get yourself miscast as an executive, in spite of the fact you haven't got the "right stuff" for the role, you will then be better qualified for miscasting those on whom you depend for success.

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Recipe #17

How to Put Feelings
Ahead of Performance

There are people who believe that you have to "feel like" performing before you can perform your role well. Or that feelings are more important than performance. Buy into that if you want to fail more flamboyantly.

page 109

Recipe #18

How to Practice Dilettantism

A “dilettante” is a person who jumps from one thing to another, looking for the one that will make him or her successful. These are panacea-seekers. That’ll get you on a sure path to failure. If you have followers, they may be dilettantes too.

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Recipe #19

How to Reward **B**
while Hoping for **A**

For those who are going to fail, rewarding the wrong thing, in themselves or others, will speed the process. Doing the same thing over and over again, but hoping for a better result, is the conventional way of playing the game. It doesn’t work. But you can make it work for you.

page 125

Recipe #20

How to Play the Explanation Game

Another game failing executives play is the explanation game. To them, an explanation of why something did or didn’t happen is intended to be a reasonable substitute for the accomplishment intended.

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Recipe #21

How to Miscommunicate

Miscommunication is a fundamental way of failing oneself and others. The possibilities are endless, with new inventions every day. Well-developed, this is a form of suicide.

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Recipe #22

How to Prepare for
What's Already Happened

Ever notice how people set themselves up for failure by devoting excessive amounts of time to explain and prepare for something that's already happened? It's an exercise in ensuring future failure by looking confidently backward.

page 147

Recipe #23

How to Own Other People's Problems
... so They *Can't*

Simple enough. If you own other's problems, *they* can't own them. So keeping others from growing up by owning their problems for them is a way to ensure your own failure down the road.

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Recipe #24

How to Pick the Wrong Facts

There are facts and then there are facts. There are the ones you perceive easily. Then you can't see the ones you need to see. Here's how to do *that* better than others.

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Recipe #25

How to Fail the Way Virgins Fail

A metaphor, of course. But a useful one. Most virgins fail. So can you, if you take the lessons of how to do so to heart.

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Afterword

There needed to be a place to turn things right side up again after turning them on their head. This seemed the best place for that.

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About the Author

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By Way of An Introduction

*“How can we fail
when we’re so sincere?”*

– Charlie Brown

Just so you will know ... I have walked in the shoes of those executives and wannabes who may find the ironic stance of this book not only entertaining but useful. In addition to functioning as an executive/CEO (more or less successfully), I’ve worked and consulted with people in that role for just under five decades. I have conducted seminars for many, many hundreds of them on this planet.

I have been a trusted consultant to a wide range of executives in every industry and of every size. And I have partnered with them as a coach in developing their leadership in order to make truly high-performance organizations. They are therefore my friends, my peers, my fellow travelers.

I do not malign them by taking the position that most CEOs will *fail*. Most *will* fail – minimally, their own expectations, if nothing else. They will fall short of their own hopes and dreams.

At the end, they will not be ecstatic about their lives on earth. Many will live in frustration and they will die in frustration, because they will not have achieved what they envisioned when they were young, or when they first took over their role as executive or CEO. They may exhibit outward bravado. They may take on all of the trappings of success by accumulating the stuff that signals success in our society – wealth, material things, and a way of walking and talking as if superior to those who have accumulated less.

Now, what does it mean to be holding a book of recipes about “how-to” *fail*?

Consider the following:

- More than 10,000 books about how to succeed as a manager or an executive have been published in the past couple of decades. And this doesn't count the many more thousands of seminars on how to succeed. All this effort and all this expenditure does not seem to have changed the rate of failure.

So the perverse logic is this: If you can study how to succeed and still manage to fail, maybe you could study how managers and executives have failed and thereby get some clues about how at least to avoid failing in the ways they did.

- There are few books at Amazon.com about how to fail. This, in spite of the fact that most managers and executives do fail. *Where are they learning how to do this?* Up to now, they've had to learn it on the street.

With *How Executives Fail* you can look into their executive offices, and learn for yourself how they failed. In order that you may – masterfully – fail, if you so wish. With intent and aplomb. Or, perhaps you can appreciate the irony of coming at it this way. And thus learn not so much how to succeed, but how to avoid failing. At least how to avoid failing in the ways so many of your predecessors and your contemporaries have. Or will.

- We all know that others will not consider an executive especially sane if he or she sets out to fail. Still, most will fail. *Mediocrity* is not the same as excelling. Maybe it's only a mild form of failure. Some have failed spectacularly, as the business press tells us. But most just sort of fizzled out along the way. We don't hear much about them. Where or what is the black hole that sucked them into mediocrity against their will and their intentions?
- Here's a puzzling fact. Executives who fail are *more likely* to be avid consumers of the flood of literature on "how to succeed" than are those few who actually do succeed. So, is it not ironic that they may be getting plenty of advice from the business press about how to *fail*? All that "how to succeed" advice is cleverly packaged to seduce the unwary into thinking they could succeed if only they bought the next great book or the next seminar promoting the latest or most popular panacea. Billions are

spent every year on executive education. Days and weeks are lost, while executives “train” to be better than they are. But all of our problems have not gone away, have they?

- Here is what’s truly ironic. People seem to be infinitely creative about how to fail. Maybe they didn’t pick it up from a guru. But keep in mind that the sale of his or her next book depends not upon the success of the readers, but *on their failures*. After all, if the book succeeded, and the readers succeeded, these gurus would be out of a job, wouldn’t they?
- Finally, it’s plain wrong for thousands of managers and executives to spend many billions to collect the currently-fashionable ideas about how to succeed when most of them are going to fail anyway. Doesn’t it make sense to make use of the principles that have contributed to their failure – to reveal the secrets of how they failed?


None of these people, on whom so much of our future depends, *wants* to fail. Or in the case of this book, wants to learn how to fail. So my theme in this book is not really how to “fail.” My expectation, rather, is that by taking this tongue-in-cheek approach, by assuming a posture of irony, a great many useful ideas about how to actually *avoid* failing might emerge.

Not one of the leaders I have worked with has, to my knowledge, aimed for mediocrity. And yet many ended up there. The fall into mediocrity is surely not to be counted as any form of success. And since being mediocre was not their aim in life, it seems

fair to assume that, in that sense, they have failed – because they did not fulfill their own purposes, their own hopes and dreams, in life. Many of those who failed, or will fail, do so as a result of contributing unintentionally to their own failure, either because of their own personal dragons (following bad advice, making bad choices/decisions), or simply as a result of their personal but ultimately wrongheaded ways of thinking and of doing things.

After decades of direct in-the-trenches experience, that's what I concluded. Maybe those few who have succeeded were just plain lucky. And maybe the bulk of those who have failed were just plain unlucky. But check out the logic here. If there is an ever-growing flood of books, lectures, seminars, etc., purporting to tell you how to succeed without being lucky, then maybe there should be this one book that provides you with tried-and-true recipes for how to fail without bumbling along waiting for Lady Luck to deal you a lousy hand.

This book reveals many secrets about how to fail. If you want to be a celebrity failure, this book tells you how to do it, purposefully and with flair. You won't have to struggle and waste time learning via the grapevine how to fail, or by imitating a role model. Here are the key insider tips and secrets you need to fail strategically, rather than embarrassingly, by default. If you want to know how so many of your peers contributed to their own failure in their role as an executive, read on. If you want to expose yourself to an *ironic* but still very *serious* twist on how you might actually achieve more of your hopes and dreams as an executive, read on for sure.

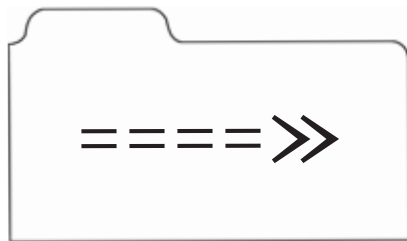


25 Recipes for
becoming a
celebrity failure.

If you are looking for the pitfalls that make failures (or, perhaps, mediocrities) out of otherwise smart and ambitious people, then this book is for you. I have revealed the common denominators of how the majority of managers and executives succeed in failing. Maybe, cleverly, you could make use of the revelations offered ... and avoid the failure train so many of your colleagues and peers are on.

One last note: The sequence of each of these little recipes for how to fail is not important. You could open the book at any page and find something useful to you, since failure, like success, is such an individual thing. And, since it probably takes as much luck to fail as it does to succeed, I wish you “Good Luck” in finding yourself – or your future – in these pages. So put your thinking cap on backwards and put a twinkle in your eye. Take a bite here and there, but always with that frame of mind that enables you to make the most of it for your purposes.

At the very least, enjoy this perverse approach!

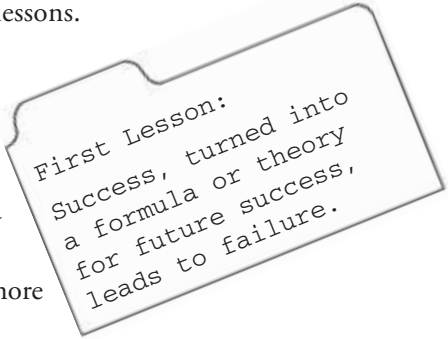


How to Breed Failure from Success

Most managers and executives who fail ... do so without really trying. If you are going to outdo them, you've got to try. You've got to think – really THINK – about the lessons to be learned, and practice them daily.

We're talking about intention here: focused, deliberate, and strategic. So, if you intend to fail on purpose – which is the only way you can take credit for it – here are a couple of basic lessons.

First lesson: If you understand – really understand – how even a small success in your life, if taken as a formula for your success today or tomorrow, can actually lead to your eventual failure, you can be more intentional about failing.



First Lesson:
Success, turned into
a formula or theory
for future success,
leads to failure.

Think about it. Most people who experience some small success at anything will concoct a kind of “theory” about how they did it and then they’ll apply that “theory” again and again. When it begins not to work, they’ll blame the world. You can almost hear them thinking, “... can’t be me. I was successful before by doing things this way.”

Do they change their “success paradigm” when the ‘usual’ way no longer works? Nope, they try to change the world around them. And when the world doesn’t change to their satisfaction, they rail at it.

The lesson is this: Make up a creative explanation of how you happened to be successful, and stick to it. **If you want to fail, be persistent in creating and nurturing your own “success paradigm.”** You’ll get there, far ahead of others, and far more efficiently. That’s one of the basic lessons to be derived from thousands of executive failures.

Children do this, and we’re amused. They get furious with the sock if they can’t get it on. Seasoned executives do this all the time. They get angry when the world doesn’t work the way their own heads do. No one finds their antics very amusing.

Here’s lesson two on how to breed failure from success:

Most people like to pretend that any success that comes their way is due to them. But, if they don’t succeed ... well, they have a larder full of excuses and explanations.

Second Lesson:
Success = my credit
Failure = others’ blame

While they attribute any success to themselves, these same people attribute their failures to any

explanation they can “sell” to others. This is kind of the crux of the matter if you think about it.

Let’s say that when you were a youngster you were rough-housing with a friend and broke a lamp in the house. Your mother was likely upset about it. She would stand over you, finger pointing in your face and ask, “Roscoe, did you do this?” You were probably thinking, “I wonder what kind of convincing story I can tell her about how this happened, an explanation that makes me an innocent bystander?” What she’ll buy, you will sell.

Adults get to be really good at this because they've had a lifetime of practice. Yet, if you got an "A" on your report card, you wouldn't blame this on your pal in class or on the teacher, would you? You'd take credit for it. Maybe neither one was your "fault," neither the lamp nor the "A", but over the years you come to see yourself as the sole cause of things that get others' approval, and innocent of any outcomes that might get their disapproval.

When you've got that down, you are ready to get "a job." Once you have a job, and you become really good at using your own theories of success, you'll likely get promoted. After all, we want our managers and executives to be omniscient – to make good things happen – and it's okay for them to take credit for all of it. At the same time, we want them to be able to explain away any bad things that happen as not their fault. Keep in mind that your superiors are better at this game than you are, so they'll blame you for their failures. Move up so you can do this too. That's a common practice that actually gets rewarded.

The better you are at this, the better you will fail. It may take some others years to fail, but you've decided to do so on purpose. So, why put it off?

There's a Catch 22 here, of course. After all, who would believe you if you credited yourself for failures, but credited others (or conditions like "the economy") for successes? That would be much closer to the truth of the matter, but who would believe you? That's not the way celebrity success stories are purveyed by the media. The most popular ones are the "overnight" successes – who gain fame and fortune just for being "talented"! You play it the way it's played, and thus become blind to how failure – and success – actually happen.

Given this way of thinking –

- Since you cannot readily imagine that you are part of the cause of your failure, you never learn anything about what part of the problem you may have been. As Alan Cooper put it in his book, *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum*, “**The unfortunate side effect of not understanding failure is the silent admission that success is not predictable – that luck and happenstance rule the ... world.**” [Emphasis mine.]
- And, since you are confident that you are invariably the main cause of your success, you never learn what you need to learn about the other factors that have always played a role in any successes you may have had.

It’s a way of stupidifying yourself in order to facilitate your failure. It’s very common. In the end, if you consciously practice it, you can fail on purpose, surpassing all those others who fail by default.

History has proven that your peers have a very poor understanding of success and failure. Everyone is doing the “right” thing until the lights actually go out. If you can’t get down to reality, you will be equally victimized by both your successes and your failures, just as they are.

Here’s a role model for failure:

Hal was a go-getter from the git-go. He came into the company eager to blow everyone else away. So he got promoted on the basis of his enthusiasm, as often happens. He had some reasonable successes early on. Thinking that this meant he was superior to others, and that he therefore had the key to success,

he continued to apply his very own “success paradigm” in every new situation that emerged. It hadn’t occurred to him that luck and other people had played major roles in his early successes. His success paradigm was the real truth, to Hal.

He became arrogantly out of touch. The more he tried to apply the “secrets” of success from his earlier days, the more he failed. Because he blamed everything and everyone else for his increasing failures, and because he could only see himself, alone, as the cause of his success, he continued to fail. This did not affect his job, of course. He was kept around by people who shared his mind-set. At age 54, he had already been “out to pasture” for a couple of years. He was still hanging out there, but no one paid him any heed. To the younger managers, he was a joke. To his superiors, a nuisance. To himself, a victim.

There’s a moral in there. If you can’t find it, being victimized by your own “success paradigm” is almost assured.

Here’s a hint: People see the world in terms of their explanations of it, their explanations being, for them, reality. So, a little success goes a long way. Even a small success goes to one’s head. We want to relive it, over and over again. We cling to it, like a child clings to her magical, comforting blanket. Try taking that ragged old blanket away from her and see what happens – the little angel will turn into a ferocious “devil”! That’s the way failing executives cling to their “theories.”



William James once wrote to H. G. Wells about “the moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS.”

Could he have meant “mental flabbiness” as well?
“Success” often does function like a “bitch-goddess.”

Have you noticed?

People cling to the “theory” of success as they’ve created it. And reject the possibility of any culpability for their failures. So they never really understand either one. That’s how failure gets bred from success. Way to go! **You can make it work for you if you simply practice taking credit for any success you may have, but blame others or blame “circumstances” for your failures.**

Every “motivational” speaker or writer in the Western world can tell you how to make success out of failure. There’s a multi-billion-dollar industry devoted to it. And why are these books and seminars a growth industry, even in bad times? Because they don’t work. So the same people need to attend the next one, buy the next book, be “true believers” in the magic of “success.”

Something like “Success for Dummies.” Or, as Evan Esar, writer and humorist, put it: “Nothing succeeds like success, and nothing fails like reading a book on how to attain it.”

That’s because writers of that *Secrets of Success* book sitting on everyone’s desk this week, are writing about how to make *success out of failure*. Something he or she couldn’t do in real life, so they decided to write a book about it (see #6, “How to Maintain Your Gullibility”). As in, “those who cannot do, teach.”

Those books that contain hundreds of success paradigms which executives carry around like trusty six-shooters will eventually start shooting blanks. The executives will be going through the motions, but the motions will no longer fit the facts. The theory or paradigm will have warped to fit the executives’ needs, not the realities of a changing world.

So cling to your success paradigm no matter what.
Failure will eventually be the product. Guaranteed.

Let me share an old but useful story:

A drunk lost the keys to his car. A kindly passer-by asked him, "Where did you lose your keys?"

"Over there," the drunk replied, pointing to a dark alley.

"Then why are you looking for them over here?" the passer-by wondered.

"Because," the drunk replied, "the light is better over here under the streetlight."

The executive who is destined to fail wields his "success paradigm" like that streetlight. As if enchanted by the beam of light cast by a long-ago bit of success, he expects that tiny beam of light, always growing dimmer, to illuminate every situation he will face. He provides evidence of the old adage, "Nothing breeds failure like success."

Why? Because success brings complacency. And complacency brings failure.

That, friend, is how you, too, can breed failure out of success. Little by little, but with certainty, your success paradigm will breed every problem common to failing managers and executives – every problem but success.

W. C. Fields had some advice for failure:

*"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
Then quit. There's no use being a damn fool about it."*

It takes a long time for most people to realize they have failed. But it isn't "cool" to fail just like everyone else does. Let your own unique success paradigm do it for you – and, instead of being like most others – cut to the chase.

Failing on purpose is noble failure. Failing by default is the clod's way out.

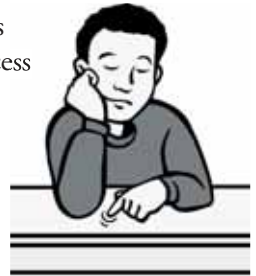
How to “Achieve” Mediocrity

The notion that mediocrity is “achieved” surely brought a smile, or a smirk, to your face. Most people do achieve mediocrity. Few **intended** to achieve it. Fewer still had a **strategy** for doing so. Therefore, the competition for failing in this way is fierce. As the old adage goes, “The pursuit of mediocrity is always successful.” So you’re up against almost certain success by others. And they won’t even be trying.

Mediocrity seems to function in (modern) society a bit like gravity. It does its best work when you give it no heed. Very much a “going with the flow” kind of thing. It’s all downstream. All you have to do is let go. Like earth’s gravity, it will pull you in with no effort on your part.

If you want to escape that destination, you have to muster something like escape velocity. You have to overcome the fantastic forces of mediocrity that prevail in everyday life, in order merely to avoid it and thus to fail on your own terms.

But wait. This is not about escaping from what is, for most people, the inevitability of mediocrity. This is about how to get there faster and more efficiently



– that is, by plan. And keep in mind that becoming mediocre is something that almost everyone you know (and some you don't) can help you achieve. If you did want to succeed, instead of lolling around in mediocrity, you would suffer not only being alone in your quest, but you would suffer the derision of the majority – who speak from the strength of numbers. The question is, how can you get there – to the depth of mediocrity – before they do?

An elusive lesson may come from the French playwright Beaumarchais who, in his play, *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784), said,

*“If you are mediocre and you grovel,
you shall succeed.”*



First Lesson:
Be **arrogant** in your
mediocrity!

I say, avoid groveling. Wear your mediocrity like a cloak of honor. Be arrogant in your mediocrity. Be superior, celebrate! Let people suffer the ruthlessness of your determination to be mediocre! You have to be *more* mediocre than your thousands of competitors.

More mediocre than your colleagues, than your family, more mediocre than your friends. This means avoiding any success that might come from apologizing in any way for your mediocrity. Be the one-eyed king in the kingdom of blind people.

For many years in Australian business circles, the implicit code of your mates was that outperforming them was okay only if it happened by accident. But if you were trying to become excellent on purpose, you would be scorned (the “tall poppy” syndrome – a metaphor for cutting people who intend to be better than you are off at the knees). Did the Australian

business community get this from us? There are still vestiges of that attitude in America, especially within organizations that are themselves mediocre.

Avoid the scorn of success. Be no more ambitious than the next fellow. And, if some success does come your way, be embarrassed by the way it happened upon you in spite of your best intentions ... to be a "good mate."



Marie was a modest lady. She was very bright, more capable even, than some of the fellow employees in her department. Even than some of her superiors in the organization. But she deferred to them, something she somehow learned growing up. She wanted to avoid rocking the boat in any way. She wanted to be as invisible and anonymous as possible, never to be the source of controversy or the center of attention. Her immediate boss liked her for her attitude of silent servitude, because he was just like her. You know, getting along with everyone. They were both well-liked by their peers. They both failed, together, as the company slowly slipped into oblivion.

The lesson? She had no *plan* for failing. Nor did the company. Shameful.

To fail by default—forexample, by being mediocre – is even more embarrassing than succeeding by default, i.e., by luck. **If you're going to do it, do it with great fanfare and aplomb.** Otherwise you won't get credit for it. And what kind of life would that be?

D’Israeli wrote:

“...it is a wretched taste to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us.”

Well, how wrong could he be? In a democracy, taste lies with the majority of people. And if people in such overwhelming numbers are gratified with their mediocrity, who is he to pretend to be above the crowd? Be wary of “excellence.” It will bring you nothing but trouble and travail. Far better to take the easy path. Don’t take Robert Frost’s “path less taken.” Get on the one with the deepest rut. Outdo your fellow-travelers on the path to mediocrity. Elevate your mediocrity to the most superior form of life,

and of your performance at work.

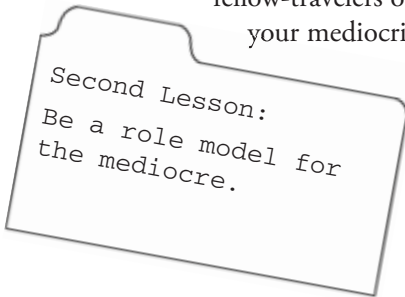
This will not only make you very popular, but it will accelerate your failure. Be a role model for the mediocre.

Everyone knows that a leader, by definition, is a person who has “followers.” Which only means that it

is the mediocre followers who make leaders successful – or not – in their bizarre quests. Flex your muscles. That’s where the power lies – with the mediocre. Be their champion.

The managers and executives who fail, whether out of laziness, indifference, or sheer incompetence, are the ones who preferred the path most taken: the easy path, the path worn down by millions – just like them!

There cannot be any real stigma attached to failure, of course, if “everybody” is doing it. That’s the beauty of mediocrity. Stick with the crowd. They’ll take you



Second Lesson:
Be a role model for
the mediocre.

there with minimum effort. With a little more effort on your part, you’ll get there afore ’em.

Here’s the bottom-line:

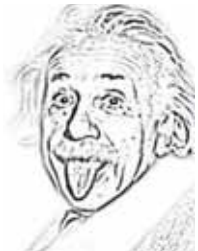
- If you need to be liked, you will fail. Easy enough.
- If you always need to be approved of, you will fail. Be obsequious.
- If you need to go where everyone else is going, you will fail. Go with the flow.
- If you are unwilling or unable to pay the price to succeed, you will fail. If success isn’t free or at least cheap, don’t buy it. Argue for “balance.”
- If you hang out with mediocrities, you will fail. But get them to hang out with you. Be their exemplar.
- If you don’t know the difference between good advice and bad advice, you will fail. Accelerate your journey: be a raving fan for bad advice.

There you have it. Six of the “thirty-six habits” (or whatever) for achieving mediocrity.

Albert Einstein once observed,

“Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities.”

Well, okay. But where would Einstein’s opposition have come from without all of those “mediocrities”?



Take solace and validation from Somerset Maugham's observation:

See also: Ray Bennett,
*The Underachiever's
Manifesto* (Chronicle
Books, 2006)

“Only a mediocre person is always at his best.”

All you have to do is be more mediocre than they are, at their own game.

About the Author

Lee Thayer is best known for his acerbic wit, his engaging style, his sense of humor, and for the depth and breadth of his intellectual resources. Accompany those traits with his accomplishments and the work he does in this complex world of ours, and you begin to get an idea of Thayer's vision for the "thinking, being, and doing" of leadership.

Thayer's goal is to visualize the ideal, and then to figure out how to get there by starting with the actualities of the present circumstances.

Like some of the rest of us, he wants to leave this world a better place. And he's doing it – organization by organization. Many say that in his craft he has no peer. His approach is as unique (often counter-intuitive) as it is powerful. It is a life-changing experience for those who are fortunate enough to work with him.

Thayer's work begins with an invitation from an exceptional and exceptionally committed CEO – to partner with that CEO for the purpose of transforming his or her organization to an outstanding level of performance, while learning the kind of leadership required to deserve a great organization. (A high-



Dr. Lee Thayer,
author of ***Leadership:
Thinking, Being, Doing***
(2004)

performance organization is one that does everything it does better than anyone else – and improves upon that every day – giving that organization a *sustainable* competitive advantage.)

Thayer gets into “the trenches” with those who are going to make it happen, to help them every step of the way. As he says,

“It isn’t what you know that creates excellence. Ninety-five percent of it is in the implementation. For that, you need a guide and a mentor – someone who’s been there in all kinds of conditions.”

Dr. Thayer’s career as a pioneer and influential innovator in the design and development of high-performance organizations – and in the kind of leadership required of the top executive to achieve that – has spanned more than four decades. It has often been observed that he has rattled more CEOs’ cages than anyone else.

Having come from a high-level executive position in industry himself, coupled with his experience as a jazz performer and arranger and his university degrees in the humanities, engineering, and psychology, Dr. Thayer has developed a revolutionary and practical framework for understanding *what it takes* to lead the way to creating great organizations, expressively in the ‘*how*’ as much as the ‘*why*’. He and his CEO partners often have to **invent** the pushes and pulls required to achieve the kind of excellence that others can’t figure out how to copy.

Early on in his career, he served as consultant to several of the Fortune 500 and other notable companies, such as IBM, AT&T, Westinghouse, Boeing, Curtiss-

Wright, Pratt-Whitney, McDonnell Douglas, Phillips, Shell, General Motors, Sealtest Foods, and Hallmark. He has consulted with the U.S. Air Force, the Postal Service, numerous banks and other institutions, universities around the globe, and West Point.

He was the consultant behind the now well-known success story at Johnsonville Foods – which Tom Peters referred to as “the most remarkable example of organizational transformation” he had ever seen.

He has taken his extraordinary problem-solving skills to the Scandinavian countries (esp. Finland and Norway), to Australia, to the UK and most European countries, and to Canada, Mexico, and China. Today, he limits his work to small to medium-sized organizations where, as he says, the impact is more immediate and measurable.

His other “career,” as a distinguished university professor in major universities both here and abroad (e.g., the Harvard Graduate School of Business, The University of Amsterdam, Queensland University of Technology in Australia, Universidad Complutense in Mexico, etc.) was an ongoing research project he “put up with” for thirty-five years, before “retiring” in 1991 to devote full time to his passion which, as he has described it in interviews, is

“... to help committed CEOs and other top executives transform themselves into leaders and their organizations into healthier, more vigorous, and more adaptive high-performance organizations.”

Doing so, many have observed, has brought life back into those organizations, and has lifted the quality of life of its employees, both at work and at home.

Dr. Thayer has been invited to work in most of the major leadership development programs in the U.S. and abroad, to share the wisdom he has gained during his many years of working and coaching “in the trenches” with his carefully-selected CEOs to make outstanding performance a way of life. Thayer has conducted hundreds of seminars and has spoken before thousands of top executives. He has served as the manager of dozens of organizations and projects, including work for the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Office of Education, and NASA.

He has been recognized as a Ford Foundation Fellow, as a Danforth Teacher, and as a Fulbright Scholar.

Truly a Renaissance man himself, Dr. Thayer is one of the most sought after seminar speakers and consultants in America.

Also by Lee Thayer,

Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing (2004)



New Revised Edition – coming in January 2007
from *WME* BOOKS (www.WMEBooks.com)

CEO coach, author, consultant, and popular seminar leader
Lee Thayer is back to rattle your cage.

Rattling cages is what he does best!

Since most executives fail (they fail at least their own hopes and dreams), the author wondered, where are they learning how to do this? There are thousands of books about how to succeed. They don't seem to have made all that much difference. None about how to fail. Maybe, the author surmised, if they are learning how to fail from books about how to succeed, a book about how to fail would have the same perverse effect.

Maybe a little irony and humor would be useful - revealing that how an executive thinks always determines the outcome. So here you have it. Here is the definitive book about how executives contribute to their own failure without even knowing it. It's a smile a page. You'll see your peers, maybe even get a sideways glimpse of yourself. If you get into it, it'll change the way you think. Likely for the better.

Praise for Lee Thayer's Leadership: Thinking, Being, Doing -

Lee Thayer has followed his own leadership convictions and insights in writing a book that is itself the art of leadership. It is refreshing, authentic, and has a penetrating integrity. Don't take it lightly.

- Max De Pree
Chairman Emeritus, Herman Miller, Inc.
Author of *Leadership is an Art*

Praise for Lee Thayer's consulting work -

When we first met Lee Thayer, our company was growing slowly at about 10% per year. Within a couple of years of following his ideas, our growth rate was 100% per year. Our customers became raving fans. We were receiving prestigious awards. Most importantly, our employees were more productive, full of life, and dedicated than they ever were before. ... Some of his concepts were initially hard to grasp. But I came to see that he was right.... Once you begin the journey to high-performance, nothing else will suffice.

- John T. McBeth
President & CEO, Next Century Corporation

