

# Inc.

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## **Write Down Your Failures. You Just Might Learn Something BY Bill Murphy Jr.**

If you only celebrate your successes, you're missing a huge opportunity to learn from your mistakes. Here's how a "Failure Wall" can change that.

After you fail, sometimes it helps to read the writing on the wall.

That's what Jeff Stibel, chairman and CEO of Dun & Bradstreet Credibility Corporation--a California company not affiliated with the more famous Dun & Bradstreet on the East Coast--came to realize.

About two years ago, Stibel and his assistant [snuck into the office at night](#) and created what they called a Failure Wall. The point was to encourage colleagues to scrawl out their [failures](#) in permanent marker, where anyone and everyone could see them. It was also a very public reminder that few failures are as bad as people think. In sharing the really big screw-ups, he hoped, perhaps others could learn something.

Among the confessions were a junior associate who failed to include a timeline in a contract he was working on, which wound up killing the deal. Another colleague's marriage ended and still another lamented, "Ordered \$15,000 in golf hats and no one liked the stitching."

## How We Process Failure

Stibel, 40, was in a doctoral program for brain science before he left to start running businesses like Web.com. But the most important lesson he brought with him from the academic world, he says, is that humans learn far more from failure than they do from success.

The brain is actually a "failure engine," he says, and it's trying to "interpret the world around us." What's more, it's integral to remember our failures, because "we are making far more failures than successes. But over time, we learn. That's how we go from infants to babies to children to adults."

In this way, the Failure Wall is part of an ongoing effort to create an organization that learns just as the brain does. "Personally, I'm not smart enough to outdo Mother Nature," says Stibel. "Evolution has had hundreds of millions of years to figure this out." But the hope is to create a business "brain" that gets smarter and smarter.

## A Crazy Idea?

While the Failure Wall might work for Stibel and his colleagues, it certainly isn't for everyone. "This 'embrace failure' mantra might sound cute to some, but I would not want it associated with my business and my brand," says John Boyd Jr., principal of [The Boyd Company](#), a Princeton, New Jersey consulting firm.

"Embracing the failures of employees does not pay your bills and ... lets employees off the hook even when they are impacting your bottom line," agrees Daniel Goldberg, CEO and director of [Gold Medical Marketing](#).

Those executives may be surprised to learn the wall has sharpened Stibel's business acumen.

Among his failures were a decision not to sell an earlier company to Google. Also, "One dollar per month domains was a really bad idea," he says, referencing his decision to try selling custom URLs at Web.com on a monthly basis. "It was a huge failure. It just didn't take, and it cost us a lot."

However, as a direct result of that failure, his company executes most contracts with clients on a yearly basis, which has proven to be much more profitable.

"We learned," says Stibel. "If we had not taken that risk--or swept it under the rug--no one would have known."

*It's a new year and I'm in a new city. Now this column needs a new name. Want to help me choose? [Vote here!](#)*