



PERMISSION TO FAIL

By Greg Wiens

Adapt: Why Success Always Starts With Failure

By Tim Harford

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 320 pp. \$27.00

As leaders, most of us believe that leadership significantly impacts an organization's outcome. And we're not alone; this assumption that the quality of leader determines the success of an organization is played out every four years during the presidential election. This assumption is turned on its head; however in Tim Harford's book *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure*.

The first few chapters of this book demoralized me. Harford spends a lot of time explaining why too much influence is attributed to leadership. He gives a great deal of empirical evidence to counter the assumption that leadership actually matters. Don't quit your positions of influence just yet, though. You'll need to read the rest of the book.

Harford explains that business problems today have become more complex, and are too much for one individual to solve alone. Harford spends an enormous amount of effort to show the reader why the problems facing today's corporations (and churches) are so multi-faceted and unpredictable that leaders cannot make wise decisions. There are simply too many unpredictables beyond the control and knowledge of the leader. So when we see success (however we define it) we may ascribe it to a result of one or more decisions, but in reality there were many unknown factors that go completely under our radar.

Harford says it this way:

Success is much more a result of trial and error than of intelligent decision-making. In a complex, changeable world, the process of trial and error is essential. That is true whether we harness it consciously or simply allow ourselves to be tossed around by the results. But whether we like it or not, trial

and error is a tremendously powerful process for solving problems in a complex world, while expert leadership is not.

As a foundation for this book, Harford distills three principles of success from the work of the early 20th century Russian researcher and engineer, Peter Palchinsky. Palchinsky, his wife Nina, and about 10,000 other engineers were sent to their deaths in Siberia during the Stalinist Russia of the 20's and 30's because of his disagreements with the Soviet structure of centralized government.

These three principles, listed below, quite obviously fly in the face of Stalin's socialism:

Palchinsky's Three Principles of Success

Seek out and try new things.

When trying something new, do it on a scale where failure is survivable.

Seek out feedback (to determine your level of success) and learn from your mistakes as you go along.

This is where the importance of leadership reenters the discussion. Good leaders can positively impact the success of an organization, but Harford would say that the way leaders can make a difference is not by attempting to make wise decisions in a complex world, but rather by creating a culture that adheres to these three principles.

Leaders need to create space within their organizations (churches, take note) where people are free to try new things and fail. The caveat is that leaders must ensure that when they fail, they don't take down the whole organization with their ambition. Lastly, leaders must find a way to evaluate the success of failure of efforts and then be willing to face the answer. According to Harford, most of the time there will need to be some sort of adaptation to ensure success.

In the local church, Palchinsky's principles are violated weekly. It appears that many churches across America are not about to attempt anything new. Once a church starts a ministry, it is continued forever without any thought of reviewing its effectiveness. The other extreme is churches that are continually trying new things without paying attention to the second and third principles.

Churches should encourage the regular spawning of new ministries and venues, however, each of these should be done in a manner that does not threaten the health of vitality of the church as a whole. Experimenting is great; just don't take down the whole ship in doing so. Churches should learn to embrace failure. Only through failure can a church truly learn to adapt its mission to relevantly impact the community for Christ.

Along with ensuring that failed ministries don't take down the church, we need to be conscious of always evaluating the efficacy of our ministries in a way that allows us to

adapt. Healthy adaptation will only occur if we continually evaluate the impact of our ministries for the Kingdom of God. When they are not impactful, we must have the courage and wisdom to then adapt them in ways necessary for increased success.

So often, churches and leaders ascribe practices or models attributes of success when we are not really sure what led to the impact. I remember when Willow Creek Church started a church planting arm that plant other churches in the manner that Willow was planted. Eventually, after the high failure rate of these new churches, this organization was quietly discontinued. Today, Willow practices the three Palchinsky principles well to create more successful initiatives.

Adapt is a wonderful book, which discusses everything from biological evolution to nuclear reactor catastrophes. The author even looks at our most recent economic recession in light of these principles. It is an enjoyable read and will take some time to get through it. However, the application to the church is not a hard one to make. May the church learn from these three principles to allow God to work and we to be faithful in walking by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7) by consistently trying new things in the Kingdom of God without fear of failure. Then, let us not get so caught up in attempting to replicate the latest successful model of church when we don't even really know why it had the impact it has.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT GREG WIENS, PLEASE VISIT WWW.LEADERSTHATLAST.ORG