The boots of failure are made for walking

Investigation of the bright facet of failure as a learning spiral

Author: Anna Sorokina
Supervisor: Philippe Daudi
Examiner: Björn Bjerke
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Abstract

While studying leadership people look for the examples of great success trying to set up a formula and answer the question: ‘How can a person become a leader?’ Nevertheless, failures have a great value for the learning and development process. In a leadership journey both leaders and followers face a lot of challenges, which might end up in a failure. This is a crucial moment that decides what way a person is going to take.

The perception of failure influences a perspective that an individual takes towards an issue. That is why it is vital to develop the knowledge about failures, specifically the factors influencing failure perception and ways of treating failures in business and life. That is to say, it is important to create a learning environment. The aim of this master thesis is to investigate the bright facet of failure as a trigger to resiliency and as a learning spiral. Data for the research is obtained through the survey and interviews with people of three categories: followers, leaders and ‘professions sensitive to failures’. The research concludes that there are certain factors in the organizational environment that might create a vicious circle of failure and while creating a learning environment leaders should focus on the empowering factors discovered through the interviews with people of professions sensitive to failures.

**Keywords**: leadership, failures, failure perception, learning environment
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1 Introduction

Every person faces failures during one or another period of life. In our century people feel stressed because of the increasing competition, aggravating economic situation, substitution of some professions by advanced technologies etc. and, as a result, the cost of failure seems to be enormous. Leaders who have succeeded after a failure like B. Gates, G. Steinbrenner, W. Disney, S. Jobs, H. Ford etc. might serve as an example of using it as a starting point. In spite of the existence of multiple stories with positive perception of failure, there is a question that remains acute: why there are still multiple companies, where failing is unacceptable and inexcusable and where young leaders and followers face a fear of failure.

The title I have chosen for the master thesis represents the fact that failures are not only barriers that people face in their life; they might also be a source of knowledge and experience. In the work, I want to draw attention to the processes of ‘recovering from failures’ and ‘understanding’ them. While numerous articles and books are devoted to success (see Greene 2008; Kay & Institution of engineering 2009), leadership (see Northouse 2013; Bennis 2005; Giuliani & Kurson 2002), followership and relationship between the two (see Hackman & Johnson 2009; Baldoni 2003; Carsten & Lapierre 2014; Riggio et al 2008), authenticity and self-development (see Gardner 2005), the value of failure does not get its special mention.

In the present study, the issue under scrutiny is the perception of failure and factors affecting it. The significance of learning from a failure and reflecting on the experience gained throughout it cannot be exaggerated. Since the learning process starts from the understanding, Bennis and Townsend (1996) highlight in their studies that effective leaders encourage ‘reflective backtalk’, which involves truth telling from the colleagues, including an open communication about failures. It is worth remarking though, that in reality people act more cautiously: they do not feel comfortable sharing their mistakes and they feel pressure and vulnerability when they fail.

The study takes a three-part approach by first discovering the influence of failure on people, then exploring the factors contributing to the gain of fear of failure and searching for the working strategies in business and other spheres. This study addresses a gap in the literature by revisiting the concept of failure through empirical voices and sharing with the reader the knowledge collected from the multitude of resources.

1.1 A personal approach to the research

The reasons for selecting the topic in question are numerous; however, the main motive behind the research is a personal factor. I am interested in the issue of fear of failure and failure perception because it is connected to one of the weaknesses that I have. In order to develop leadership skills I am willing to study the issue of failures. I believe that in certain situations the way a person perceives a failure is not connected to the lack of ambition and stubbornness but to the response of surroundings and an environment where a failure is conducted.

This study aims at discovering the ways the organization might influence the followers’ vision of failures and the ways of changing it. The research serves as a trial to understand -self, the author, and try to explain the reader my perspective of how a certain perception of failure is formed, why the inability to handle properly a failure is also a failure and to show examples of true failing and true succeeding in failure treatment.
1.2 Research field

‘Failure is much more faithful teacher than immediate success’

David Duchemin (n.d.)

The thesis project goes from the umbrella of ‘failures’, which covers a multitude of various points of view, to one of its aspects: ‘the understanding of failure and acting upon it’. When scholars write about leadership and success they cannot avoid the topic of failures – it comes naturally. Therefore, the question to be raised is what happens after a person has failed?

Figure 1: The umbrella of ‘failures’

I believe that the issue of failure has grown in importance in light of the increased level of different types of pressure. However, failures have always been a part of succeeding even though some people treat them as the opposite of it. The topic of failure is very bright: it involves exploring reasons for failure (Reynolds 2012; Dotlich & Cairo 2003), investigating failure avoidance (Bennis 2009), distinguishing warranted and blameworthy failures (Sastry & Penn 2014, p.25). However, to my mind, the most interesting and the most important thing in this sphere is a person’s reaction to the failure, which includes tolerating, accepting, explaining, understanding and acting upon failures (Bennis 2009; Sastry & Penn 2014;). I believe this is a forked road that defines what way a person is going after.

After the review of available literature, I felt like there is a certain gap in the research field of interest. For me it was unclear how an environment might influence the failure perception of people. Therefore, in the study I focus on framings of failure and its relation to leadership and examine how failure is explained in the accounts of different actors. This allows me to develop an understanding of the variety of ways a failure might be perceived and multitude of factors influencing this perception. I am confident that failures have a lot of lessons to be learned and their power is underestimated.
Looking at leadership and followership from the perspective of a failure, which considered being the dark side of leadership, gives a new vision to the old issues.

1.3 Research focus and research questions
The project contains a number of practical and academic objects in order to contribute with the research and outcomes of it to the creation of knowledge. This thesis discusses how a failure affects a person as well as how external factors influence the way a person learns from it.

Consequently, three aims of the paper, which are covered within the chapters three, four and five respectively, are the following:

(1) Investigate the concept and phenomenon of failure in theory and practice;
(2) Investigate the perception of failure and its effect on people/followers’ behaviors and attitudes;
(3) Investigate the bright facet of failure as a trigger for resiliency and as a learning spiral.

Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following question, which serves as a golden thread through my thesis:

What organizational factors influence the way failure is perceived and how might be created the environment, where learning though dealing with failures is possible?

1.4 The concept
A failure has a variety of definitions, which either might be a part of general understanding of the concept or be connected to certain areas. In leadership a failure might be defined as an inability to ‘achieve group or organizational goals’ that causes loosing follower endorsement (Giessner, 2008, p.14). In project management failure is perceived as a combination of poorly performed internal (team performance, meeting budgets, dealines) and external processes (level of effectiveness from the clients perspective) or early termination of the project (Nixon & Harrington 2012, n.p.). When talking about a managerial failure Robert and Joyce Hogan (2003, p.41) define it as ‘having undesirable qualities’, while Bentz (1985 cited in Hogan, R & Hogan, J 2003) identifies seven themes associated with failure: (1) inability to delegate; (2) being reactive; (3) inability to maintain relationships within a network; (4) inability to create an effective team; (5) having poor learning skills; (6) having ‘poor judgement’; and (7) having an ‘overriding personality defect’.

Nevertheless, the usage of general description of the concept in this thesis does not limit the options of perception and gives space for the further categorization. Therefore, it is useful to state that this paper is using a definition given by Merriam-Webster (eds. 1993, p. 417), which gives a certain freedom in identifying the meaning of failure:

FAILURE

1. omission of occurrence or performance;
2. a state of inability to perform a normal function;
3. a fracturing or giving way under stress.
In addition to this definition, the concept of failure will be further considered by all the types of the respondents of the thesis survey in order to show the influence of the environment on person’s perception.

1.5 Structuring the thesis

In the next chapter I am talking about the methodological aspect of this paper, describing the approach and tools I use to gather and analyze the knowledge. The main part of the thesis might be divided into two parts. The first part, which includes chapters three and four, touches upon the value of failure and factors that might influence its perception. The main aim of the theoretical framework to give the reader the base of the subject in question and to gain some knowledge about what I am researching. Then, I continue with an empirical part, which investigates the concept of failure from followers’ perspective. The main aim of this part is to find out the organizational factors influencing failure perception.

The second part of the thesis investigates failure as a learning spiral. Taking into account the results of the first part I look at the creation of the learning environment in an organization from the perspective of scholars and leaders, as well as investigate the role of failure in other spheres. Therefore, this chapter aims at examining the conditions that might change the issue of ill-perception of failure.

Finally, I end the thesis with a conclusion of my work and suggest issues for the future research, that I came across while writing the paper in question.
2 Methodology

Methodology concerns the personal development of the researcher’s perception of the reality. In order to create and search for new knowledge, methodology uses different concepts. Methodological view refers to the opinions of the meaning of different methods, which are ‘guiding principles for the creation of knowledge and choosing among techniques’ (Arnbor & Bjerke 2009, p. 423). A researcher tries to find out ‘why some views are used the way they are and why some problems are solved the way they are’ (Abnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 32).

In this part of the thesis, I am outlining the ways I use to achieve results by sharing with the reader a methodological approach, different tools of data collection and its analysis.

‘So the problem is not so much to see what nobody has yet seen, as to think what nobody has yet thought concerning that which everybody sees’

Schopenhauer A. 1851

2.1 Creating the knowledge: my vision of the topic

The researcher is a ‘creator of knowledge’ who investigates the reality around him/her in order to understand it, disqualify, confirm or enlarge the existing idea about the world (Arnbor & Bjerke 2009, p.19). Not every researcher has the same understanding of the reality around him/her which is subject to the investigation, it certainly depends on frames of reference that he/she has; thus the assumptions I have about the data collected might differ from those that the reader has. That is why I believe it is vital for me to be as much transparent as possible and to clarify, what exactly I am doing while exploring this subject, what point of view I have concerning the definitive outcomes and why I am doing it. Then the reader will not be left with unanswered questions.

I have started with a rather broad question asking myself what value a failure has in leadership. However, the limits the question put on the topic were not enough for me. One of the reasons why I specify the initial question is because for me the most important thing about a failure is not why it happens and how to avoid it but rather what happens after, how to make sense out of failure to handle it and what are the factors that influence which way of perception a person chooses.

2.2 A qualitative approach

In this research, I use a qualitative approach, meaning that I employ data transmitted through language rather than through numbers (Legewie 1995). The research is aiming at understanding, explanation and interpretation of empirical observation with correspondence to the previous studies (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p.16). I have chosen the qualitative method to have a possibility to ‘enter the reality of the participants, to see the world from their perspective’ (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p.16). Finding out the connection between different organizational factors and a failure perception, I believe, can only be done by speaking to people with various backgrounds. I am certain that the outcome from this data is much more interesting and meaningful since the topic requires discovering and understanding of what respondents feel, while they overcome a failure and what is important from their perspective.

In order to show all the possible factors interfering in the relationship between an individual and a failure, I have to be able to include and represent the opinion of every each of the interviewees. I speak to those people who have experienced the pressure,
influencing their perception of failure, and ones who see the situation from the different perspective. After all, I introduce some data presented quantitatively, by which I mean ordinal and cardinal data, in order to show what factors are more frequent when it comes to failure perception and which ones do not have that much of influence as it was assumed before. From the statistical point of view, the number of the participants in the survey, which equals to 43 people, allows to make general assumptions about the trends in failure perception (Bjerke 2016, 4 May).

2.3 Qualitatively applied system approach
In the systems view, objective and subjective parts are ‘built’ into systems, where the summary of the parts will not result into the whole (Abnor & Bjerke 2009, pp.61-63). In other words, the property of the system studied cannot be explained by the sum of its components by their own and involves a synergistic effect, meaning that the connections between the elements of the system also contribute to this system (Abnor & Bjerke 2009, pp.61-63).

The system view might be used to explain as well as to understand (Abnor & Bjerke 2009, p. 66), thus, I choose to use this approach. While trying to explain, a researcher collects information about a model as it is in reality, looking for ‘producer-product relations’ (ibid, 2009, p. 66). When a researcher is trying to understand a system he or she might interpret it by bringing a metaphor, adding something in order to develop the researcher’s perception (ibid, 2009, p.66). A creator of knowledge might start his research by describing real system’s behavior, identifying the forces affecting the system and formulating potential relations (ibid, 2009, p.66). Concerning the topic of failure perception, on the basis of the literature review I assume that the system consists of two types of factors: personal and organizational, where the second are mostly connected to the ‘leader-follower’, ‘follower-follower’ and ‘organization-follower’ relationship. In accordance with this assumption, I am developing the questions covering evident elements of the system in order to find out what kind of influence they have and how strong the connections are.

During the research I collect data, both primary (by making a survey and conducting interviews) and secondary, analyze it by using coding methods, comparing the information with each other, establishing different connections between the elements. After all, I develop a theoretical framework that helps to see the meaning of the data and construct the interrelated elements. While looking at all the answers from the survey and the interview transcripts I feel the existence of certain patterns, connections, logic, a sequence that, after all, build my theory described in the fourth chapter of the thesis.

2.4 Data collection
The main sources used in the study can be divided into two types: sources of primary and secondary data. Before revisiting the failure through empirical voices I find it essential to talk about the value held by failure and explain why they are important in individual’s life.

2.4.1 Secondary data
In order to understand the concept of failure in leadership, its features, and particularities, I start with the review of the secondary data, which is empirical data collected by other researchers and scholars, covered in books, articles, interviews and performances.
Using the combination of leadership studies, where the focus is majorly on self-leadership, and case-studies, where the focus is majorly on experience of the companies and people, brings a general understanding of the topic and serves as a good basis for further research. For me, it is important not only to talk about a failure made by a person but also to draw the attention to the reader that failures happen in every sphere and no one is insured against them.

Abnor and Bjerke (2009, pp. 302-305) suggest using secondary data with some attentiveness and carefulness since not every source is reliable. Thus, my data sources include only accredited publishers and scholars. While studying their works I also try to take into consideration the aim of their research and the author’s approach for data collection.

I believe that the combination of secondary and primary data allow the reader to develop a general idea about the failure and then look at it from the perspective of learning from it.

2.4.2 Primary data
I want to devote a separate part of the thesis to describing the collection of primary data, as it is an essential content in my work. Doing a face-to-face research is a first decision that I have to make since the planning and execution of this part is time and energy consuming. Nevertheless, it leads me to the results I could not even expect.

The basic construct of my thesis is built upon the interviews. Talking about failures is a difficult topic that causes vulnerability – people do not feel comfortable sharing the downsides of their careers, especially when they do not fully believe that this is an important part of their experience and knowledge development. While collecting primary data I have noticed an interesting regularity. In the majority of cases, a person is comfortable to share with an interviewer only a certain amount of information. People who equal a failure to an experience share details of their failures and specific examples as well as answer provoking questions. On the contrary, people who tint a failure negatively are not comfortable sharing their insights. In this case, the answers to the questions are strict and resemble just ‘a direction’ of their attitude towards failures.

I split my research into three parts. The first phase includes an online survey and interviews with people, who are called ‘the crowd’ or ‘the followers’ within the paper. This step allows identifying the factors influencing follower’s perception of failure. The second phase includes leaders’ perspective. The main aim of this stage is to identify the strategies they use to establish a learning environment. In the third phase, the aim is to get a general vision of the factors that help an individual overcome failures. Therefore, the interviews are conducted with people of professions requiring strong attitude towards failures.
In order to analyze the interviews conducted in the best possible way, I record them with the consent of the interviewees. I have also gained consent from my interview partners that I could name them personally in my work. All of the following have agreed to these prerequisites. Their interviews will be reproduced within chapters four and five while discussing a corresponding topic.

**Phase I: Interviewing ‘the crowd’**

The first phase of data collection is done with the help of the World Wide Web where I am able to advertise the survey among the people of the same age as mine but different background. By advertising the survey, I mean that I post it in various social media and encourage people from my network to take part in it. Consequently, I have a non-probability sampling technique with the people of age from 18 to 30 as a target audience.

Majorly ‘the crowd’ might correspond to the young people who are students, trainees and employees at the early stage of their career. They come from 18 different countries, represent both multinational and national companies and include 20 men and 23 women. When referring to them I use the term ‘the followers’ because all of the respondents have a direct leader.
Each person of the survey answers the questions requiring a detailed answer. The questions are structured with the main idea of understanding what a person implies in the concept of ‘failure’, what factors affect the level of his or her anxiousness and how he or she copes with challenges.

I experience that a structure is needed while forming the questions, since it prevents a researcher from shifting away from the research question. After the literature review, I have certain areas that I want to cover throughout the interviews. Therefore, the structure of the questionnaire includes four topics: (1) perception of failure and success; (2) acting upon one’s failure; (3) fear of failure and (4) uncertainty avoidance. The description of the aims of each question is further specified in the upcoming subchapter. The questions are created majorly open-ended, so that the descriptive answer is encouraged.

**Table 1: Survey and Interview questions for the followers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What is your interpretation of a failure?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do you think that a person is able to avoid failures and mistakes in this life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What does the word ‘succeeding’ mean to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Share the experience when you failed in the early stage of your career. How did you feel about it, how did you perceive it then and now? What was the reaction of your boss?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When you fail (make a mistake) what is your first step?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Does the pressure (from your colleagues, from your boss) make you anxious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>How might this pressure lead you to make mistakes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How does your relationship with boss contribute to anxiety about things about your future, to having a fear of failure? (In this case, ‘relation’ means the lack of connection, different visions with the boss or his unacceptance when it comes to mistakes making)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>In what cases do you feel anxiety about the risk of being fired?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>How does your boss react when you make a mistake?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Who you can talk to when you have made a mistake? (Questions behind: Do you feel support from your co-workers, a working team while fulfilling a task? If something goes wrong or you lack experience, do you think you can ask for their help? Will you admit to your co-workers that you made a mistake? Will you ask for assistance of others? Will you feel vulnerable if you admit your shortcomings to others?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>In the working situation would you prefer to have a clear outcome of your actions but less profit or to take risks with a probability that the outcome might be more profitable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Why do you might take the responsibility and lead of the task which outcome is not clear and there is a risk of failure (if the boss assigns you to this task)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researching the logos of the questions
The first three questions are aiming at understanding, what exactly a person implies in the concept of failure, how he or she understands the role of challenges and sees success. Those questions are helping me to divide respondents into two kinds of mindsets - growth and fixed - and analyze the results from the perspective of established relationship between an individual and a failure (Dweck 2006). Why exactly I distinguish those two types is further specified in chapter four.
Questions four and five imply an experience a person has with a failure, the reflection on one’s mistakes and understanding of them then and now. With the help of these questions, I measure the progress a person is having when it comes to failures, and one’s immediate reaction upon a mistake: what from the perspective of respondent is important to do first and what he or she avoids.

Questions six and seven deal with the stress and pressure a person is having at work and his or her ways of dealing with it. Here I try to understand what amount of pressure influences a person’s ability to think clear, where this pressure comes from and why it affects a follower.

Questions from eight to ten are connected to the understanding of the relationship a follower is having with a leader: what makes him/her feel stressed and anxious, whether there is support in this relation, how a leader contributes to their relation etc. At this point for me, it is important to get a general view of the connections between various factors influencing the relationship ‘follower-leader’.

The question eleven aims at getting details about the relationship among followers and understanding what elements contribute to this relation and how they do that. The last questions are connected to the topic of uncertainty avoidance and risk-taking. Based on the questions I try to construct general patterns and behavioral models of people in order to understand the influence of factors on the perception of failure as well as on each other.

When I go through the material gathered by the Internet survey and personal interviews I feel to be missing some voices. What I find surprising is that all the respondents come from the continental Europe and Russia and they split almost equality concerning the matter of gender representativity. Taking into account this outcome I believe that it would be more efficient in the course of my analysis in the fourth chapter, if this is appropriate, to bring the examples of the studies concerning America and Asia by other authors.

**Phase II: Interviewing leaders**

The next phase of the survey is connected to the failure treatment from leader’s perspective. For me it is important not only to see how a follower feels about a failure but also to understand how, on the other side, a leader sees this failure, what actions an effective leader takes to help one’s followers overcome the fear of failure, what policy he or she uses and how it contributes to their relations.

The logic of the questions is based on the special aspects of failure perception from the perspective of the interviewee and his or her ways of acting upon a failure. Leaders participating in the interview are a part of my network and have an interest in talking about the topic in question. I choose interviewees on the basis of availability, different backgrounds and existence of leading experience. After interviewing seven people I feel like I have enough data for the analysis. The structure of the interviews with leaders is following the questions listed below.

**Table 2: Interview questions for the leaders**

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is your interpretation of failure? (What sense do you make out of this word, what is your relationship with failures?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do you think that a person is able to avoid failures and mistakes in his/her life?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Can you remember one of the crucial moments from your career when you made a mistake or failed? How did you feel? How did you act upon it? What was your first step? What was the reaction of your boss?

What is your tolerance for failure? In what cases you treat failure as crucial or non-crucial situation? In what cases you have a fear of failure (does it concern your career, your personal life, public speaking etc.) How do you overcome this fear? Does somebody help you or used to?

What kind of pressure in your mind makes the followers feel anxious (pressure from co-workers and competition among them; pressure from economic situation of the country (like the increasing rate of unemployment and a risk of being fired); some pressure from you or other leaders in the company, etc.)?

How do you treat followers/employees who have made a mistake/failed? What do you say to them? Please, bring an example of a failure of your follower if possible. What did you do in the situation?

How do you praise and compliment your followers when they do a good job? In what cases do you encourage your followers to take responsibility, to be open to risk? How do you perceive an open-door policy in the company?

Are there followers of yours who have a low tolerance for failure (they might be afraid to take the risk, they might be afraid to take responsibility, they ask for approve of their every action, etc.)? Did you try to change this situation? If yes, how do you do that?

What, do you think, are the multicultural differences in the perception of failures? Have you experienced at work that people from the specific country or region have a lower level of tolerance to failing, or it is not connected?

While talking to leaders I try to understand how they treat failures themselves and if they create a learning environment within the organization they work for. During the analysis of the interviews I try to find the resemblance of the theory as well as major patterns that they use while communicating with followers. At this phase the main aim is to investigate the real experience of learning from failures from leaders’ perspective and to categorize the strategies they apply.

**Phase III: Interviewing athletes, musicians, actors and writers**

The third type of people who I want to interview are athletes, musicians, actors and writers. The aim of doing it is to discover failure from the lens of leadership. In other words, I want to see how certain leadership skills might influence the failure perception. Therefore, in order to investigate the external elements helping to overcome a fear of failure, I talk to people of professions, where failures and various challenges are a big part of development. I call it ‘professions sensitive to failures’, because the failure in this spheres is open and that is why there is a lot of pressure coming from different sources that might influence failure perception.

I have stopped at seven interviews because I felt that the information had reached a high level of saturation and was enough for establishing certain patterns. The interviewees have professional career in sports, including team sport and solo, music, acting and writing. While talking to them I want to discover what vision they have when it comes to failure, how they overcome the missteps and breakdowns and, what role people around them have. My aim is to find out what kind of vision and mindset in correspondence to a failure the interviewees have; project relations between a follower and a leader as well as relations among followers/teammates in sports e.g. to the
business sphere; compare those two types and to find out what strategies concerning the failure treatment might be applied.

There are multiple reasons why I choose the interviewees. First of all, they are part of my network, which creates a communication channel on a personal level, especially when it concerns such multifacet topic as failures. While talking to them I feel that they want to share with me various details of their career. Secondly, they are of my age, which makes the communication easier; however, due to their commitment to sports, music, writing and acting they have a vision in terms of failures and mistakes that differs from mine and my peers. Moreover, they cover different aspects of engagement with failures. They come from four different spheres; they started their career at a different age, they are a part of a team or act solo. Since all of them are from Russia, the interviews are conducted in their native language, which I believe contributes to the higher level of authenticity and reliability of the answers.

*Strengths and limitations of face-to-face interviews.*

Since, the topic of failures and its perception is sensitive, as a researcher I have to consider social desirability bias, especially during the first step of the primary data collection, which is an internet survey. At the first step the respondents are fulfilling the questionnaire and in order to make them feel more confident sharing the details of their attitude towards failures it is anonymous. However, I am fully aware that this approach is less conclusive than face-to-face interviews and separate the researcher from respondents. Nevertheless, I believe that the survey let me make the targeted audience more diverse.

The main part of the primary data collection is based on the interviews in person or via Skype. Since Skype interviews lack the opportunity to investigate the interviewees (Abnor & Bjerke 2008, p.177), the first step before the interview is to establish a trustworthy relation with an interview partner with the help of ‘icebreakers’. All the interviews are conducted in informal setting, which put conversations at ease.

The primary research is conducted by interviewing participants mainly from Russia and European countries. Therefore, this matter of fact limits the developed concepts making it applicable to the countries mentioned above.

*Data analysis*

The process of data analysis is crucial, since this is the ‘act of giving meaning to data’ (Corbin & Straus 2008, p. 64). While analyzing primary data I am using coding in order to find common patterns and resemblance of theoretical framework. I start my analysis by, first of all, going through the survey results. Since all the questions of the survey are open-ended I put them in one table and compare both answers by different respondents to the same question and answers to different question by one respondent. This allows me to come up with the main categories of factors influencing individual’s perception. Then, I investigate the correlation between different elements by searching for patterns and logic of answers within interviews.

While analyzing interviews with leaders and athletes, musicians, actors and writers I also use coding by, first, selecting words that might be relevant to the study. For the further analysis, the words are compared to each other and aligned. In the end, they form categories. Therefore, the vicious and virtuous circles of failure (see Chapter four and five) might serve as an example of coding process.
2.5 Summarizing the thoughts and beyond

In this chapter, I introduce my thoughts and insights of the process of doing a thesis research. For the research I use qualitatively applied system approach, meaning that I imply mostly data transmitted through language.

In order to determine the links and connections among different factors of failure perception I open an empirical window to hear the voices taking part in the survey, such as ‘crowd’, ‘leaders’ and ‘professions sensitive to failures’.

The role of the ‘crowd’ is to reflect the vision of the followers and their attitude towards failures in order to construct a system of elements influencing the perception of failure. The role of the ‘leaders’ is to share their experience concerning the strategies applied by them in business and the role of ‘professions sensitive to failures’, who are the representatives of the professions connected to sports, music, acting and writing, is to share their personal experience of overcoming a failure, in order to collect the elements positively influencing failure perception.

Conducting a research for this thesis is challenging; however, that makes the topic even more interesting and triggers my desire to broaden the knowledge concerning the topic in question.
3 Theoretical framework: the experiences of failure on and in between the lines

In the current chapter, I highlight the role of failures in the person’s and company’s experiences by using literature review and case studies. The aim of this chapter is to touch upon the issues such as: (1) differences of failure and success perception; (2) importance of learning side of failure; (3) influence of failure on individual’s behavior; and (4) relation between leaders and failures.

In order to discuss the abovementioned topics, I summarize the available literature and when it is appropriate bring examples of successfully and unsuccessfully treated failures from different spheres.

3.1 Failures and success: does the binary thinking work here?

The world’s sensemaking highlights the fact that there are failures in our life and a person cannot avoid their existence (Dawes 2007, p. 20). However, a failure is treated like one because people do not like when it happens (ibid, 2007, p. 20). The term ‘failure’ carries along with it a negative effect, a ‘meaning of the end’, ‘finality’ to which the rational human response is a discouragement. The human nature does not allow us to accept the fact that something ended up into an unexpected result (Dawes 2007). Nevertheless, when ‘a failure’ is replaced by another term, like ‘a challenge’, ‘a false start’, ‘a mess’ etc. in a person’s mind, he or she might start treating it differently, e.g. as an experience, a beginning, an issue to be figured out; in other words, as something that might give a person food for thought for further steps (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70). Therefore, when it comes to failures the issue usually concerns, first, the meaning a person implies in the concept of failure and his or her level of tolerance to it.

Failure and success are two things that cannot exist without each other. As long as the humankind recognizes success it will always recognize failure. Traditionally management books are based on the ‘clear-cut distinctions between success and failure’ (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Raelin, 2009 cited in Laamanen et al, 2016, n.p.). However, when we say that it is either a failure or a success we follow the binary thinking and our world is much more complicated than that. At one point, the concept of failure and success reminds me of yin and yang because there is no pure and clear definition of any of those. On the other side, I believe that the concepts are opposite only in a way they are perceived by people at least for now but not in the value they have for an individual. Therefore, I opt for describing success as a puzzle consisting of multitude pieces, where one of them is failure. When an individual or a company treats a failure as an element of success, then a binary thinking stops being applied in this sphere.

Scholars writing about leadership and success (Bennis 2009; Guiuliani & Kurson 2002; Manz & Sims 2001; Northouse 2013) regularly mention a concept of failure, emphasizing its significance on the way of becoming successful. Arguably, the learning aspect of failure exists theoretically; however, its practice is still poor. Nevertheless, the examples of success coming out of failure might be found in real life. For instance, ballet, it is a type of sport where failing is part of self-development and overcoming the fears. The hardest years are usually the first ones, when an individual does not have certain knowledge of operating and, thus, one is not motivated at those stages. When a person, usually a child, starts learning dancing on ballet shoes she or he is failing to do that properly for at least one year, which is a huge amount of time in children’s scale who want it ‘right here, right now’; otherwise, they are discouraged. That is why an
environment where a child is growing plays an important part in the process of overcoming a failure and learning from it. If a person continues to try, applies different strategies, after all, one will manage to succeed going off of failure. Another example of continuity within failure and success is the story of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes. In 1898, the company’s founder failed at the attempt of making granola for breakfast and accidentally left a boiled corn in a pan for a night (Kellogg Co 2011). This failure has made a revolution in the industry by giving the founder of the company an idea of producing ‘cornflakes’ (Kellogg Co 2011). Therefore, a failure might open up an alternative way to move forward, as long as a person makes mistakes in good conscience (Corday cited in Bennis 2009). Moreover, a failure is like a litmus paper or test drive – it shows what is working and what is not; gives an individual or a company precious lessons about an environment (Cyert and March 1992). If a person looks at a failure from this perspective, from the perspective of learning, then it is more than just an opposite of success.

3.2 The value of ‘x’ in formula of failure: trial and error, and learning method

In the end of 20th century scholars started acknowledging that a person can learn from the dark side of leadership – failures (Clemens & Washbush 1999). There has always been a connection between failing and learning (Dawes 2007, p. 20). An expression ‘trial and error method’ is applicable not only in mathematics, where a person tries to find out the value of ‘x’ and ‘y’, but to some extent it might be a description of an individual’s life because there are no clear instructions how to live and how to do business. When a link between failing and learning is strong, a person sees ways of gaining profit from a made mistake and reaches a goal by employing the energy in a new strategy (Dawes 2007, p. 20). Majorly learning processes involve failures, which serve as a signal, encouraging learning and choosing the way of acting in the future (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70).

In business sphere, apart from great stories of success, there are also stories of learning and acting upon a failure, which might serve as an index of effective operating. The Domino’s Pizza Company is known for fast delivery; however, due to the degeneration of quality both its sales and income bottomed (Domino’s Pizza 2012). The decision of making a change came to question when loyal customers started opting for the products of company’s competitors (ibid, 2012). As part of the change process the company has developed its core product, while searching for the best and the most demanded combinations of components (ibid, 2012). The goal of the company was not only to change the quality of the product but also its reputation and brand. In the advertisement, it acknowledged the failure and asked customers to give the company another chance (ibid, 2012). As a result, the company recovered from failure and improved the quality of the product (Li 2011). People described this way of acting upon failure as an act of authenticity and boldness, which made them try the product one more time (Li 2011). To certain extent, the openness and boldness of the company allowed it to make a failure educational and to see an opportunity of development in a negative feedback. In alike cases an absence of any reaction might, first, cause a company alternative development and, then, be a reason for bankruptcy. Thus, Domino’s pizza exemplifies an effective failure treatment, while creating for itself a learning environment.
‘Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from failures as from his successes’

J. Dewey (n.d.)

Following the topic of success and failures, it is actually interesting to note a learning process of both and its difference. It seems that when a business is successful it does not require a lot of attention. This is a system that works and performs well, like a clock. When everything is working well, nobody stops to reflect (Bennis 2009, p.219). A good outcome is commonly taken for granted and the progress stops. That is to say, when there is no necessity for a change, the company uses the same approach multiple times until it faces a barrier. In the similar topic Madsen and Densai (2010) introduce an example of global orbital launch vehicle development. When the launch of the vehicle succeeded by reaching intended orbits both scientists and decision makers have stopped the progress because they interpreted this success as evidence of having the full organizational knowledge of the world (Madsen & Desai 2010). People did not see the need for further development of knowledge in this sphere, as after the success they started feeling overconfident and had an optimistic assessment of their knowledge (Raspin 2011).

The likelihood of changing the behavior is higher when a company reacts on failure rather than on success, since actual or expected failure might suggest a company changing its goals or forecasts (Cyert & March 1963 cited in Baumard & Starbuck 2005, p 283). Therefore, according to Cyert and March (1963), contemplation of failure encourages ‘behavioral innovation’ (cited in Baumard & Starbuck 2005, p.284). On the similar theme Bennis (2009, p. 110) argues the importance of failures by saying that most of the people are shaped more by the negative experiences than by positive ones. When a failure happens, the situation is analyzed right away. Sastry and Penn (2014, p.24) claim that people think deeper while trying to explain failed results than when they account for their success: ‘once you accept that failure is given, you can design work to incorporate experimentation, variation, and iteration; creating small failures designed to prevent bigger ones’. In the history of global orbital launch vehicle (Madsen & Desai 2010), every failure was followed up by the expansion of knowledge. A failure triggered the necessity of change; thus, at that moment, all forces were put into progress. A moderate failure might draw company’s attention to the potential problems, motivate people to improve (Sitkin 1992 cited in Baumard & Starbuck 2005, p 285) and when firms pay more attention to failing short they might avoid large failures after all (Cannon & Edmondson 2005).

Therefore, there might be a certain value in failing short, since ‘small failures might enable discovery and learning’ (Sastry & Penn 2014, p.16). When people fail, they disconfirm incorrect hypotheses, and that fosters a change. As a result, they look for a different, alternative and better way of functioning and operating (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.378). The examples of learning from failures and importance of their acceptance might be found not only in biographies of successful leaders, books, films but also in stories for children, e.g. the comic book ‘Flash’ starts with a failure and narrates about strategies of coping with all the negative outcomes. That is a failure of the scientific center, its main scholars, and it results into the particle accelerator’s explosion. In that book, some characters see in this failure unprofessionalism of the scientists, others – an end of their career. From many perspectives, this failure is seen as a catastrophe. Nevertheless, people have discovered new possibilities, new theories –
they have made a huge step in science. Certainly, this is fiction; however, it shows that in the majority of cases the benefits of a failure might be found.

In the reality, potentially valuable failures go to waste, since ‘extracting their lessons is difficult in practice’ (Sastry & Penn 2014, p. 16). Companies ignore a chance to get experienced and to learn in case of a failure. In the history of Harley-Davidson Inc. (Harley-Davidson 2001-2006) there is a failure, which might serve as a good example of ignoring a potential value of it. In 1990s the company, whose brand associates with toughness, freedom, masculinity and raw power (Harley-Davidson Inc. 2016) introduced perfumes to the market. Losing the focus and vision brought the company to falling into a trap, where it was following a strategy of increasing the volume and range of produced products in order to augment the sales and revenue (Trendafilov 2015, p. 322). However, in this case, the loyal customers of the company were confused with the perfume and could not associate the values of the company with it. The immediate reaction of the company to this failure was to dismiss the product from the market (Harley-Davidson Inc. 2016). Its further actions give reasons to believe that it also has failed to understand the true reasons for failure. After a while, Harley-Davidson (2016) released to the market wine coolers and clothes for children with the brand logo. Consistent with the annual reports, their revenue loss was not drastic – the biggest one, according to the calculations, was 12% in 1995 ($1.54 billion in 1994 comparing to $1.35 billion in 1995) but the loyalty index was affected (Harley-Davidson, Inc., 1995; 1996). For a couple of years, the company tried to develop new products, including perfume for women, that did not conform to the initial type of product – motorcycles. However, in the end, their intentions failed. It is arguable that in this example Harley-Davidson fails twice: first, when the company decides to launch a new product and, then, when it does not analyze the reasons for failing.

Cannon and Edmondson (2005, n.p.) claim that the reason why companies do not learn from failure might be their ‘lack of attention to small, everyday organizational failures’, while Sitkin (1992, pp.231-266 cited in Baumard & Starbuck 2005, p 285) perceives small failures as ‘early warnings signs’ that might help companies to avoid catastrophic failures in the future. However, even when a company faces a large failure the way it handles it, first, and then the way it learns from it defines its further way of development. As an example may serve a story of Johnson and Johnson company, that showed the power of right handling of a failure in their turnaround PR programme for medication ‘Tylenol’ (Johnson & Johnson Services 2015). During the fall of 1982, an unknown replaced Tylenol Extra-Strenght capsules with cyanide-laced capsules and released it to the market in Chicago area (Fink 2002, pp. 203-219). As a result of this action seven people from Chicago were reported to be dead. The news instantly influenced the market share of their medicine from 37% to zero (Fink 2002, p. 206). According to Fink (2002, pp. 207-210) the response of the company was immediate: first, they informed through every mass media that the consignment is dangerous; secondly, they recalled the medication from pharmacies in the whole country and analyzed the samples; then, the company announced a $10.000 reward to the one who has any information about people caused this failure. The subsequent step was to return ‘Tylenol’ on the market and in order to do it properly the company double-secured the production; changed the pill’s cover to make it safer as well; gave out 25% discounts and had presentations in pharmacies all across the country (Fink 2002, pp. 215-219; Johnson & Johnson Services 2015). After all, the market share of Tylenol increased to 24%, which is considered a success (Johnson & Johnson Services 2015). The example of Johnson and Johnson shows that it is possible to recover from a failure, even though in the fields connected to the society’s wellbeing that might be extremely challenging.
Moreover, the company manages to learn from the failure aforementioned and finds the spheres to be developed; in this context, a failure defines inefficiency of security system.

Overall, ‘learning from failures is a hallmark of innovative companies’, however, as it was mentioned above, in practice it is not common (Leonard-Barton 1995 cited in Cannon and Edmondson 2005). Like in a Harley-Davidson example, the majority of companies do a poor job of learning from failures (Leonard-Barton 1995 cited in Cannon and Edmondson 2005), while it is nearly impossible to ignore them without taking any actions when they happen. Edmondson (2002, pp. 128-146) argues that even the companies that invest money into the creation of ‘learning environment’ struggle, when it comes to the activities of learning from failure. Since the organization as a system involves both social and technical attributes, the barriers embedded in social systems, which is, first of all, psychological ‘reactions of people to the reality of failure’, affect the general state of the learning environment (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, pp.301-303). Therefore, investigation of individual’s relation with failures might clarify the phenomenon of learning from them.

3.3 Slightly unveiling a mystery of person’s interaction with failures

The relation of a person and failures is certainly strong and contains numerous mysteries and questions. On one side, failure ‘interacts’ with a person psychologically by making him or her question the values and overcome –self. Failure makes a person reflect on the experience, which plays a big role in a way a failure is perceived after all. Northouse’s (2013, p.54) leadership skills model shows that the experiences that a leader goes through [Bennis and Thomas (2002) call it ‘crucibles’ as intense and traumatic experiences], influence the knowledge to solve further problems. That is to say, that people who set up a learning environment apply certain leadership skills like an ability to find a meaning, an ability to demonstrate a strong sense of values and integrity and adaptability (Northouse 2013, p.54).

Besides that, a failure has a certain ‘physical’ reaction from an individual. Assuredly the study of the ‘brain function’ is incomplete; however, the scientists have proved that negatively perceived information or information connected to the strong emotions of a human being is held in our memory longer (Murray 2008). Since failure is always a stress to a person, lessons learned from failures stay longer in a person’s life. Moreover, a potential failure also has a reaction from a human body (Jones & Bright 2011). When a person is in stress his or her attention focuses on the most important things, the energy level, as well as arousal levels, rise (Jones & Bright 2011). It means that a person uses his or her full power of solving a problem without being distracted by trivia (Jones & Bright 2011).

This is what happens e.g. to students when they have deadlines or when they experience an effect of stress while writing an exam (Misra & McKean 2000). Before entering the classroom students always feel that they lack knowledge. However, while actually writing an exam they concentrate the attention on certain things, try to come up with solutions and do not get distracted (Misra & McKean 2000). The capacity of their brain reaches the maximum level. When an exam is over and the level of stress goes down, a person loses this concentration and might even not be able to resolve the tasks that he or she has solved before (Jones & Bright 2011). This might be an example of a beneficial effect of fear of failure; nevertheless, an effect of stress cannot actually increase a nonexistent knowledge of a person.
On the other hand, an individual is also negatively affected by a failure and a fear of failure. First of all, a failure has an impact on a person by interfering with one’s ego. A strong fundamental human desire is to be held in high regard by other people, thus the majority “tacitly believe that revealing a failure will jeopardize the esteem” (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302). People feel that through the disclosure process the positive impression of other people might be eroded; therefore, they have a natural aversion to admitting and unveiling a failure publicly (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302). Moreover, when an individual’s truth is doubted by other people, an individual starts doubting one’s expertise and as a result, the ego is wounded (Bennis & Townsend 1995, p. 118). Since it is natural for a human being to defend himself or herself in this situation the fear of failure appears, which affects the desire to take risks and the level of inventiveness (Gans 2011). The problem of having a fear of failure is related to the fact that the brain process connected to failure perception happens on the subconscious level, so that a person does not deal with a real fear (Winch 2013). Thus, the fear of failure leads to self-sabotaging on the unconscious level and a person creates excuses for a failure (Winch 2013). Even outside the presence of others, there is an instinctive tendency of a person to ‘deny, distort, ignore or disassociate oneself from one’s own failures’ (Goleman 1985 cited in Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302).

Besides the fundamental desire to be appreciated in the eyes of others, individuals also believe that they have a certain amount of control over personal and organizational outcomes, which gives rise to the unrealistic positive view of the self (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302). These ‘positive illusions’ might be ‘incompatible with an honest acknowledgement of a failure and inhibit a learning process’ (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302). Having an executive or leading position does not imply an ability to admit one’s own mistakes, since in the majority of cases a company rewards success and penalizes failures (Argyris 1990, pp. 14-15; pp. 60-61). Moreover, according to Finkelstein (2003, pp. 179-180) ‘the higher people are in the management hierarchy, the more they tend to supplement their perfectionism with blanket excuses’. Dweck (2006, p. 22) uses a term ‘CEO disease’, describing the willingness of a boss to be idolized and infallible. L. Iacocca might serve as a perfect example of a person seeking for the recognition of his status. Since the beginning of his career, Iacocca desired to prove his superiority. When H. Ford asked him to leave the company, Iacocca angrily perceived the request (Iacocca & Novak 1986). He began doubting his skills and abilities; thus, in order to prove others his expertise he started working for Chrysler Motors renovating it by the new models development (Iacocca & Novak 1986). When the status Iacocca aimed at was reached, the company stopped development of new models. Iacocca, who feared his employees might get all the credit, fired those insisting on innovations. Iacocca was afraid to jeopardize his esteem by making a mistake so that Chrysler Motors was producing the same models for several consecutive years. After all, the Japanese cars came to the market and Chrysler Motors’ market share went down again (Iacocca & Novak 1986). Iacocca was fired but he never admitted his failure. Bennis (2009, p. 190) argues that ‘leaders know the importance of having someone in their lives who will unfailingly and fearlessly tell them the truth’, however like M. Thatcher (Gardner 2011, n.p.) Iacocca surrounded himself with people who had the same opinion and were afraid to confront him and his ego (Dweck 2006, p. 25). For Iacocca the confrontation was a threat to his status, and as story shows, this is all he cared about.

As the example demonstrates in case of failure it is vital to have a ‘clear understanding of what a proactive process of learning looks like’ and even leaders and managers might lack it (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302). Failure perception requires a certain
learning model that people and organizations should develop, and, first of all, these are leaders who should make a decision what strategy they take towards a failure. Therefore, taking a closer look to the relation of leaders with failures might serve as a logical end of the literature review in terms of the failure perception phenomenon.

3.4 Avoiding or learning – leaders’ choice

In general, there are two types of leaders: one walk on a thin ice and take risk when they have a possibility to do that, while others try to avoid failures and pull away from them. According to Bennis (2009), one of the main differences between those two is that the first type understands that leadership is not a solitary act and relies on other people in search for a progress, while the second prefers safety to innovation. Nevertheless, effective leaders have a specific relation to failures (Bennis 2009).

When it comes to leadership, one of the basic elements that Bennis (2009) mentions is the mix of curiosity and daring, which means that leaders want to take risks and have a strong desire to learn from their experience. Besides that, in business sphere risks are everywhere and their main feature is a chance to end up in a failure – so, leaders have to be prepared to ‘embrace errors’ (Bennis, 2009, p.35). Of course, a failure should not be an aim or a goal, a leader has to realize that this is a ‘by-product of every business functioning’ (Richardson 2011). Therefore, Richardson (2011) wonders what conclusions a business develops out of failure. If the company fails to learn from mistakes made, then this is a failure; however, if the company makes mistakes but along with that it collects knowledge and develops, then this might also be part of succeeding (Richardson 2011). A formal chief executive of Johnson & Johnson J. Burke admitted in his interview that he encouraged his people to take risks:

If you believe that growth comes from risk taking, that you cannot grow without it, then it is essential in leading people towards growth to get them to make decisions, and to make mistakes. (Dealy & Thomas 2004, p.56).

One of the most famous Burke’s stories is about him failing badly and losing over million dollars. When the General Johnson called him, he rephrased Einstein’s (1879-1955) ‘who has never made a mistake never done something new’ (n.d.) by saying:

The hardest job I have is getting people to make decisions. If you make that same decision wrong again, I will fire you. However, I hope that you will make a lot of others and that you will understand that there going to be more failures than successes. (Wurman 1992, p.55)

Therefore, it might be seen that a leader’s mission is to develop a certain skill towards learning from failures, but also to encourage one’s followers not to fear them.

When a leader learns from failure, he constantly progresses and reaches one’s goal in the end. This might be seen in the biggest success stories, like the story of Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company. On his way to success, he faced a lot of challenges and failures, and the automobile industry is not the most accepting and understanding one (Marquis 2007). H. Ford (1863 - 1947) once said: ‘Failure is simply an opportunity to begin again, this time, more intelligently’ (n.d.). His first invention was a Quadricycle (Ford Motor Company Ltd, 2016). This automobile helped him find the first financial support (Marquis 2007). Nevertheless, Ford did not manage to make the product as he saw it. The development of the product was not only time-consuming but also required many investments that shareholders were concerned about (Marquis
2007). Soon, the company disbanded, which was a failure in the eyes of the industry. However, after spending time on reflecting and understanding Ford contacted his former financial backer – William H. Murphy – and asked for a second chance (Marquis 2007; Ford Motor Company Ltd, 2016). The one condition of working together was a presence of a supervisor, with whom Ford could not work. The next trial of making a perfect automobile included all the lessons learned (Marquis 2007). Ford has found the right men – A. Malcomso and J. Couzens. They sent their mechanics all over the world and got them back with feedback, which they implemented soon (Marquis 2007; Ford Motor Company Ltd, 2016). Within five years of developing the model they faced a lot of failures but then the Ford Motor Company came out with the world’s best automobile – Model T (Ford Motor Company Ltd, 2016). Consequently, the example of H. Ford might be described as a ‘trial, error and learning process’, which a leader takes in order to reach one’s goal.

Nevertheless, at the present time there are still leaders who avoid failures and create an unaccepting environment at the company. Avoiding a failure might seem like a good strategy, although it is usually a short-term one. First of all, keeping away from failures requires a lot of energy. When a person is not confident and tries to avoid any kind of uncertainty, it might cause excessive anxiety about details as well as a distraction from the global vision (Doltich & Cairo 2003). Therefore, the strategy results in the increasing level of perfectionism and leader’s inability to delegate (Doltich & Cairo 2003, p.123). Perfectionism affects leader’s attention and because of unwavering focus on efficiency, one might miss significant opportunities (Dotlich & Cairo 2003, p.116). Perfectionists go often too much into detail ignoring the whole picture when sometimes it is better to make few steps back in order to understand the situation. This causes an unhealthy working atmosphere; as a result, morale in a team plummet because people feel unappreciated. Overly cautious and perfectionistic leaders are connected; they both may not be satisfied with the situation until they gather the whole information about it (Dotlich & Cairo 2003, 115). Therefore, they prefer avoiding failures rather than facing them.

When it comes to failure avoidance, the scholars often mention Wallenda Factor. The Wallenda Factor stands for ‘putting the whole energy into performing and not focusing on avoiding a failure’ (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70). The origin of the term in connected to the story of tightrope walker. On his last journey, he started worrying about everything connected to the ‘performance’: tightness of rope, different mechanisms and audience (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70). He invested his whole energy not into performance but in anxiety and willingness of having control over everything. Nowadays, Wallenda Factor comes when a leader devotes one’s whole energy to succeeding, rather than to developing, innovating and learning (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70). Avoiding a failure completely eliminates the learning factor of failure, because ones it happens a person or a company is not conditioned for that and is not able to provide a proper reaction to it (Bennis 2007, pp. 69-70). Therefore, after opening an empirical window in the next chapter and investigating factors, influencing failure perception, I find it logical to look closer to the learning spiral of failure by going back to theoretical framework and analyze it in conjunction with the primary data.

3.5 Summarizing the thoughts and beyond
The concept of failure is very complex. It is hard to say what is right to do in one situation and what is right to do in the other. Nevertheless, I believe that, since the failures do happen, even if a person avoids them that much - the best thing that can be
done is to think about it, to reflect upon it and give others the possibility to do that as well.

The meaning a failure contains is more than an opposite of success. Both examples of success and failures might serve as an educational background for the development. Moreover, the failure, due to its emotional aspect might have a stronger input on a person. Therefore, an important thing when it comes to failures is, first, to establish a learning environment that might make use of setbacks and, second, react and act upon a failure. A double-failure might occur when a company does not reflect on the reasons causing failure and lacks attention to everyday organizational failures. As a result, it is not ready to overcome bigger failures when they happen, because of the absence of learning environment.

The pressure coming along with a failure, whether it is at home or at work, might be unbearable and discourage a person but it also might motivate him or her. Even when avoiding a failure might seem a good strategy, it is usually energy-consuming and short-term. Thus, the company should aim to encourage taking a limited risk, to develop and change the atmosphere to learning one. The elements to be changed might be found from the ‘ravines’ of the pressure – followers, thus they are the main object of the research in the upcoming chapter.
4 Failure revisited through empirical voices

Learning from failures is not a skill that a person is born with; it can and should be developed and taught. However, it is rather complicated to do so, as a society has a strong anti-failure bias. As the literature review shows the primary focus of many people and organizations is to avoid failure rather than to use it as an experience. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework illustrates that effective leaders develop certain skills in order to risk and face failures. On the contrary, the relationship between followers and failures is more dramatic. Since the followers are usually ‘ravines’ of the pressure in the company, they start being afraid of failing and taking risks.

Therefore, in order to find out what factors, standing in the way of learning environment creation, influence failure perception by the followers, I look for the voices with a different background, who are willing to share their knowledge and experience with me.

4.1 The relationship between followers and failures

Since the general role of failure in people’s experience is quite clear now, at this stage of the survey these are followers, who are of great importance to me. From my point of view, their relations with failures are more uncertain, unstable and are subject to various interesting factors. Thus, I can say that there is not only a link between followers and failures, neither a relation of a person with a failure but a strong relationship. In this relationship parties have an influence on each other, taking into account that a failure can affect a person by interfering with his ego (see chapter three), while a person affects a failure by acting upon it.

My assumption based on the previous literature review is that the elements influencing a person’s perceptions and treating a failure are divided into two types of groups: personal and organizational. That is why the questions are aiming at understanding the personal history with failure as well as the current situation at work and experience. The point of my study is to identify the similarity between the respondents and to find out while doing the survey the factors connected to the existence or absence of fear of failure.

Before looking for connections and relations in the survey, I want to go back to the specification of the concept of ‘failure’ introduced in the first chapter. For the research it is interesting to understand what the concept stands for from the followers’ point of view. Since the term is rather abstract and cannot have one single definition I think that it will be clearer and more indicative to make a complex description using the exact words of respondents from their interviews. Thus, when I put all the various elements of failure together the reader has a more precise understanding of what a failure in general means to followers.
In the majority of responses a failure is described as an unachieved target, an opposite of success and something that goes along with bad consequences.

Failure is if a person tries to create, achieve or maintain something and the outcome is below one’s expectations or even when a person does not reach any goal at all, which was set before. (Anonymous 2016, 12 April)

Failure means doing something wrong, which leads to bad consequences. (Anonymous 2016, 12 April)

Failure happens when a person has done something that is resulting in adverse outcomes. It means that one has anticipated the exact opposite outcomes and it probably harms one and one’s environment in a certain way. (Anonymous 2016, 12 April)

In the book ‘Mindset’ Dweck (2006) says that there are generally two types of mindsets in global: fixed and growth. In the first case people believe that what they have now is somehow an evaluation or an assessment of their potential: if they succeed while doing something, then they have a talent, if not – it is a failure for them. People with the growth mindset see a mistake or a failure as a start and another step of their progress (Dweck 2006). That is why I do not only want to find out what meaning followers imply in the concept of failure but also how they see the possibility of failure avoidance and what success means to them in order to understand what the main trend of failure perception is, and what way they are likely to choose in the self-development process. As Dweck (2006) states the fixed mindset does not allow a person to see a potential
possibility to develop, therefore, that people prefer avoiding failures in order not to feel vulnerable.

Regardless of the fact that in general a failure is not perceived by the followers as a lesson to learn and a reason for the reflection, the respondents of the survey in 84% of the cases agree that

Failures and mistakes are an integral part of growing up, personality development and life. (Anonymous 2016, 12 April)

No one is perfect. (Anonymous 2016, 14 April)

Making mistakes is a part of daily life. (Anonymous 2016, 14 April)

This standpoint is also proven by the results of another question, which shows that people are expecting to have challenges in their jobs and are not afraid to have them.

**Figure 5: What does the word ‘succeeding’ mean to people**

![Round chart with percentages]

- I make no mistakes 6%
- I can easily fulfill the task without any difficulties and big ‘consumption’ of time 7%
- I overcome challenges to rich the goal 26%
- I try to find out what I did wrong before and fulfill the task better 61%
- Other

Although respondents are quite aware of the fact that failures are unavoidable and challenge is part of working activity, I still believe that there is no more stressful time than now. The answers to the following questions show that the matter of person’s education in dealing with failure is one of the main issues in this topic that still have to be solved. It starts to be clear that despite the fact that on the conscious level people do understand the value of failure in their career, subconsciously it is extremely hard to overcome them. That is to say that the environment, where an individual is working might drastically change the way a failure is treated by a person on the conscious level.

When people fail, this is of course a stress for them, which might have different consequences. Young people who have just graduated from the university and started working at their first serious job do have a certain amount of fear of failure, which might be shown differently. They are not self-confident to some extent and do not want their boss to have doubts in them etc. Another case is an example of a young ‘know-it-all’ person with a degree with distinction but with lack of practical experience, who
might feel the pressure even more. After a failure this type of person might be even more devastated.

When I just graduated from the university I felt like I know everything, I had excellent grades and all the professors were saying that a big future is waiting for me. However, at the work place straight from the beginning I lost faith in me. When the boss gave me the tasks I did not understand what he wanted me to do. It was hard to keep up with the deadlines, because, first, I did not want to ask others for help and, then, nobody wanted to explain me. After all, I failed to finish my first project on time. That was a crush for me, I felt like I could not do anything. (Anonymous 2016, 26 March)

Thus, due to the certain change of the environment the respondent lost one’s faith and confidence and felt a constant pressure coming from one’s surroundings. On the question ‘how do you feel when a failure happens?’ people usually answer that they feel devastated, disappointed in themselves and too stupid to do anything, they lose self-confidence, get stressed and feel pressure to not make any mistakes again. That is an average reaction on a failure and that is normal, even though deep inside people understand that failing is part of growing and developing -self. Besides personal experience there are some organizational factors that influence failure perception which are main objects of the research within this chapter.

Basically, factors identified within the survey and interviews might be divided into three categories: (1) factors majorly connected to the relationship between a follower and a leader; (2) factors majorly connected to the relationship of the follower with the organizational culture; and (3) factors majorly connected to the relationship of a person with colleagues. Nevertheless, the connections among those categories have a very strong influence on each element.

The first factor is a boss or a leader. Like a parent from childhood, he or she is expected from a person to treat every mistake negatively because this is the model that is established in person’s brain since one was a kid. In general, people make a projection from an average situation at home back in the days when they came back from school with a bad mark and were grounded for that, or when their room was in a ‘different’ order than parents expected it to be. That is why when a person makes a mistake at one’s job, one expects a punishment even when one understands that it is not a crucial thing –in the majority of cases the environment provides people with a cue connects failure to unpleasant outcomes (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.130). ‘A parent who punishes without first establishing expectations and the consequences for failure will be less effective than a parent who clearly sets the grounded rules’ (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.137). If an employer or a leader has a straight vision that failures are part of an experience and it is not forbidden to risk and make mistakes – that should be stated in grounded rules as well as the limits, so the followers will be more open to extra responsibility and weights on their shoulders without growing the fear of failure inside them.

The leader, manager, supervisor or coordinator is a power holder whose opinion is the most precious for people – no one wants to disappoint their boss, especially a person of young age – that is why the reaction of the leader is the first step on the way of efficient failure treatment.
Figure 6: The influence that leader’s reaction has on followers’ perception of failure

- 40% of respondents, when failing feel devastated, ashamed, disappointed in themselves, get stressed about it, start hating failures.
- 46% of them experience bad reaction of the boss when they make a mistake.
- 67% of them are afraid of being fired in case of failure.
- 86% of them would prefer clear outcome and risk avoidance.

The figure above shows the subsequence of some of the factors. The survey shows that the way a boss is treating follower’s failure affects not only the stress and pressure in general but also the willingness of him to risk after, for example. In other words, when a person feels bad about a failure it might be also caused by one’s leader being angry and disappointed, which brings a follower to the thoughts that he/she might be fired in case of any other mistakes and that is why he/she acts safely and avoids any kind of risks. That is one of the scenarios that hypothetically might happen.

In the cases where the leader’s reaction is described by the words ‘understanding’, ‘supportive’, ‘helping’, where a leader doesn’t only lighten the burden of stress and panic of one’s follower but also reflects with him/her on mistakes, suggests the ways of handling it, explains why the failure has happened and shares his/her own experience; the follower feels that this mistake is clear and might be avoided in the future. On the contrary, almost half of people treating failures negatively experience a bad or nonsupportive reaction from their boss. In the interviews (2016, 14;17 April) they describe their leader as ‘unpleasant’, ‘angry’, ‘compassionate’, ‘openly showing his/her disappointment’, ‘responding annoyed and saying that he/she has never made stupid mistakes like that’.

My boss was upset when I failed. When I came to her office, I felt very embarrassed, especially when she was criticizing every move I made. I was devastated, when the failure happened and tried to avoid any failures, so I would not have to experience this situation again. (Anonymous 2016, 17 April)

As the example shows, an unaccepting reaction of the leader increases the burden of the already committed failure and raises the level of anxiety, stress, and fear of the follower.

Nevertheless, I do not mean that a leader should always greet a failed person with cheer and joy; the over-acceptance might be as bad as the lack of it. This relation might be seen as a quadratic equation system that involves the augmentation of one element and respond of the other element to it. Moreover, there is a medium point where the response to the level of acceptance is the biggest one, after which it goes down. What I mean by that is when a leader is understanding and helps his followers overcome and reflect on mistakes and failures that lead to the increase of motivation and efficiency. However, when a leader shows not acceptance but rather ignorance or unimportance of
failure one’s follower stops being motivated to perform and to care about e.g. countercheck. Then, in the end, there are even more failures and none of them serve as an experience or a lesson. The graph below does not show precise figures, however, it describes a trend in general. Some of the respondents in the survey mention this pattern saying that in particular situations where the leader does not draw their attention to the failure they stop seeing it after all, which ends up into a higher level of ignorance.

My leader is very relaxed concerning failures. When our team failed last month to deliver a report on time he did not react with any negativity. Now I have a feeling that the next report will not be on time as well. (Anonymous 2016, 10 April)

In this case, the failure is not only negative but it is crucial, since without learning it causes repetition with various scale, so there is no progress at all.

Figure 7: Leader’s acceptance of followers’ failures: its influence on the follower’s degree of motivation

![Graph showing the relationship between leaders' acceptance of followers' failures and followers' response.](Author’s chart: Original Figure)

The lack of the spiritual component and non-efficient mentoring is another issue contributing to the wrong perception of failure. When mentors have unrealistic expectations of their followers, when they are unwilling of mentoring and expect their follower to fail it causes the Pygmalion effect (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.259). In other words, the negative expectation is a reason for the negative outcome, e.g. a leader does not believe in the success of his follower, because of uninspiring treatment of a leader, the follower becomes demotivated and insecure about his actions, which does not contribute positively to the mutual understanding between a follower and a leader.

The relationship between a leader and a follower might decrease the level of follower’s anxiety or contribute to it. It concerns not only the leader’s reaction to failures but also other elements like one’s assistance and openness, how many responsibilities one delegates to the follower, how one values follower’s contribution, how one believes in followers etc. When a follower knows from the previous experience that the boss gets angry with him/her making mistakes, when the relationship is not open or there is a lack of help from the boss, lack of trust between the parties, a follower feels stressful and gains a fear of doing something wrong. Among 40% of respondents who feel devastated...
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The boots of failure are made for walking

after making a mistake 53% admit that their relationship with boss contributes drastically to feeling anxious and increases the fear of failure.

The second category is corporate culture includes, in general, the atmosphere at work and attitude to failure by various managerial levels and serves as an environment for failing. In the competitive world of business, the fear of failure is very intense: a mistake can cause a person losing promotion, bonus and sometimes even a job (Hess 2012). Moreover, as it was stated by Cannon and Edmondson (see chapter three) when people fail they suffer embarrassment and loss of self-esteem, in the majority of cases they treat it as an evidence of incompetence, feel the pressure or judgment coming from the colleagues. That is why the environment where people are working might be conducive to growing or make the situation even worse.

Judging from the gathered information, the working atmosphere has a direct influence on the attitude of a person to failures. First of all, when the company's policy is against failures and even supports risk avoidance, most likely no leader will help a person overcome the fear of failing or decrease his stress with an ‘open-door’ policy. That might happen because of high influence of hierarchy. The unaccepting culture causes unaccepting leaders and, after all, the used-to-be-followers become leaders - since they were working in the atmosphere, where failures must not happen they will have the same policy towards their followers. Moreover, leaders have their leaders and when the whole culture is unaccepting, it influences the policy a leader applies. If organizational culture becomes dysfunctional or even toxic it stops supporting the business, leading to multiple failures (Riley 2015). That is why the right perception of failures and openness to making mistakes should come from the managerial levels and be part of the organizational culture.

Although a relation with co-workers is also influenced by the corporate culture, at the same time it has a drastic effect on a person who has failed. Therefore, the factors connected to the relations within colleagues serve as a third category. Nowadays, people live in the world of high competition not only among companies but also among people, in a world, where employers are searching for talents. Every person in one’s career tries to be better than others, be promoted faster, earn more etc. That is why when people make a mistake they feel vulnerable when they have to admit it to others, to talk about the fact that one has not managed to do it in a proper or right way and especially to ask others for help. This action sequence is also treated by people as a failure and a defeat that hurts their ego.
Nonetheless, it appears to be that the presence or absence of help and assistance from colleagues does not affect that much the fact of pressure coming from them. Only 18% of all respondents (and 23% of those who treat making mistakes painfully) say that they do not feel support from their colleagues, which means that 54% of people know that they can turn to their co-workers in the case of necessity but they still feel anxiety because of the pressure.

The pressure coming from colleagues definitely makes me anxious. I am always afraid to make something wrong. <…> Yes, I feel support from my colleagues. (Anonymous 2016, 14 April)

The quote above shows that the support from the colleagues does not eliminate the pressure from them leading to the anxiety of respondent. One of the things contributing to this pressure is the sheer fact that a person might need one’s help, which is directly connected to his or her self-esteem, or the fear to be replaced by others concerning the task. That might be a personal issue as well as the pressure from the economic situation in the country (commonly occurring in Portugal, Spain, Greece, Russia and Baltic countries).

Among other things mentioned by the respondents as elements influencing their attitude towards failure are: ‘the necessity to prove himself/herself all the time’, ‘the discrepancy with expectations’, ‘surplus or big amount of responsibilities and tasks causing pressure’, ‘their personal story’, ‘fear of communication’, ‘lack of self-mockery’, ‘difference in vision with boss and colleagues’. All of those factors one way or another might contribute to the pressure a follower feels at work.

4.2 Tuning further the empirical voices through the lens of culture

Before going to the model combining the factors influencing failure perception, I believe, there should be discussed one issue. The feature that remains unclear for me is culture, whether it influences the way the failure is treated or not and if there are common patterns of the certain cultures. In search for answers I have talked to leaders who agree to share their experience and knowledge concerning this matter. Their common feature is that all of them are working in the multicultural company and have followers with the completely various backgrounds.
In the interview sessions conducted 26 March; 10, 13, 16, 24 April; 8 May, 2016 leaders are answering the question, what are the multicultural differences in the perception of failures, in case of existence:

I think there is the difference. In Europe, we tend to avoid failures whereas in the US they embrace them. Our culture tends to make us feel bad about it. Whereas it is part of the process; most important quality is, therefore, resilience. (Anonymous 2016, 10 April)

There are differences of communicating and working together. Regarding failures, I noticed it was more about education and environment than culture or country of origin. (G. Morel 2016, 26 March)

I do not think culture and failure perception are connected. For me, failure perception is the matter of knowledge and confidence that a follower has. (C. Touvet-Fahmy 2016, 10 April)

I think culture influences the perception of failures and also how people take decisions, how they analyze and choose. (Anonymous 2016, 13 April)

In my experience of the world, I have now started understanding that it is not a collection of countries that have the same culture; it is actually a collection of input within those countries that have the same culture. That concerns especially the large countries. Let us take as an example of people who get angry. It is very difficult to say that all Indians are angrier than everyone in China. Therefore, for me, it is not the culture that defines whether I have a high level of tolerance or low level of tolerance. It is the person I am. I have seen people in Russia who react very strongly to failing, and I have seen people in Russia who reacted very softly to failure. I do not think that changes – every country will have people of both kinds. (V. Sinha 2016, 27 March)

I do not think there is a cultural thing in failure perception but maybe rather a personality trait. However, it is hard to tell. Of course, there are different ways of approaching things from the cultural perspective, but that tense to disappear because a person uniforms with the way the business approaches things. I think that sometimes the way a person approaches things, including mistakes, is dealing with company culture to some extent, rather than geography culture. (A. Pucci Daniele 2016, 8 May)

As the reader might see the results of the survey donnot go to one way or the other, they are diversional. Thereby, it is not so fruitful and does not make sense to say that in one culture, the failure is acceptable and the level of tolerance to it is high while in the other it is quite the opposite. The attitude of a person to failure is contextual – the difference might be within the country, the company, the department. Since everyone hates to fail, it might seem that it does not matter what culture a person belongs to. Farson and Keys (2002) say that the American culture is more connected to risk, which might be true taking into account the fact how much, for instance, the risk is welcomed in the Silicon Valley with their mantra ‘fail fast, fail often’ (Caroll 2014). Leaper (2015) admits the fact that the European Failure Culture is on the way of reaching the awakening of it and is ready to rise to a challenge in risk-taking. Whatever the case might be, the globalization shows that there are no clear borders between the cultures anymore: a person might be born in one country, be raised by the parents of different cultures, go to the university in a third culture and work for another one etc. Unquestionably, there are differences connected to the traditions of countries, to the expressing emotions towards a failure, to the meaning adopted by the society (Hofstede 1984); however, nothing is constant in the real world. From my perspective, a person is more than one culture;
he/she is the mix of inputs every culture makes directly or indirectly within his/her life (Hofstede 1984; Hopkins 2009).

4.3 The failure vicious circle

Consequently, on condition that the culture in the current survey does not have an influence on the model, here are the factors that influence the failure perception. As aforementioned three categories have a strong influence on each other, therefore they somehow form a vicious circle, which is challenging to escape. The interrelation among the elements is sufficient, so when one of them is going through changes, there is a good likelihood that the others will balance it back to the previous state. Thus, without the implementation of the change in the whole vision, it is problematic to change the state of this vicious circle.

Figure 9: Vicious circle of failure

There is no beginning in this circle like there is no ending. As long as the factors mentioned exist and affect person’s perception of failure, the vicious circle will constantly spin, making the possibility to stop its influence even more challenging.

The survey and interviews help me understand what factors connected to the company influence drastically the way a failure is perceived and which ones, as it turned out, are not contributing to the fear of failure. The influence of the factors mentioned is various; nevertheless, all of them are connected to each other and have to be solved as a one. On the figure, I put the most significant factors. For example, it can be seen that 62% of respondents admit that they feel the pressure from colleagues, which influences their work. It is interesting that for 85% of respondents this pressure causes negative anxiety, stress, fear of doing something wrong.
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The main purpose of this scheme is to understand the perception of failure from the ‘inside’, in order to focus the changing strategy on those factors, which have the major influence. That means that in general the most contributing factor is the pressure at work, but then it is the turn of a company to decide what factors are affecting this pressure, what can be changed and how they can do that. Therefore, the figure is just a general vision of the factors, but I believe it gives a basis for further investigations.

4.4 Summarizing the thoughts and beyond

The voices being an essential part of this chapter open a window to the complicated world of business. I believe it is very interesting to explore and understand what are the main trends and visions of failure among people, what factors contribute to gaining the fear of making mistakes, what are the connections among them.

The relationship between a follower and a leader and the influence of the corporate culture happen to be the main aspects, ‘bothering’ the way a failure is perceived by the follower. I cannot state that diagram shows exactly what happens behind the scene of every enterprise – that would be not true. However, taking into account the diverse background of people, the amount of them, their openness to a certain extent, the reader might get an idea about the ‘world of failure’ from the followers’ perspective.

The results of the survey show that the pressure at work does have its influence. Of course, it differs: it has various scale and effect on people. I believe that it is important to know for a company and leaders that more than a half of respondents feel the pressure. Then, they might think of the factors, changing strategies etc. Should there be more project work? Should there be clearer promotion system? Should there be more one-to-one and group talks with leaders? That should be decided by a company and leaders. Therefore, I believe that after the investigation the factors influencing failure perception it might be useful in the upcoming chapter to look at a failure from the perspective of scholars, leaders and ‘professions sensitive to failures’ and examine the strategies and factors contributing to the learning aspect of failure.
5 How to: creating a learning environment

Since the fourth chapter is focusing mainly on failures and what factors negatively affect followers’ perception of failure, I think that one should focus on success. After all, no topic concerning failure can be written without uncovering it from the part of success. Regardless of the fact that I put success and failure in one line I do not think that it is binary thinking, since I do not make them opposite but investigate one through another for the more comprehensive idea of the concept of failure.

Therefore, in this chapter I examine a failure as a learning spiral though the perspective of scholars, leaders and ‘professions sensitive to failures’. I believe that the knowledge they share includes the answers for changing a vicious circle of failure.

No failure can be treated properly if the organization does not support the learning environment; therefore, to face a vicious circle of failure a company has to create a certain approach to it by using various tools and focuses, which I am covering with this chapter.

5.1 Lessons to be learned: what scholars say

In the learning organization leaders’ task is to provide their followers with conditions that enable them to lead the most enriching lives they can (Senge 2006, p.130). Since leaders are perpetual and constant learners (Bennis 2007), they develop in themselves some sort of strategy of overcoming a failure: for some of them it comes natural, others work hard to get this skill. A ‘position’ of a leader requires the skills connected to the ability to learn from both positive and negative experiences. However, if the organization desires to create a learning environment, then, first of all, an individual learning should be developed (Senge 2006, p.129).

‘One of the main leaders’ functions is to produce not more followers, but more leaders’

*Ralph Nader, American political activist (n.d.)*

An essential lesson a leader has to teach one’s followers is how to learn from failures. When a follower is afraid to make mistakes, then he or she will follow any order but will never take responsibility on one’s shoulders (Hackman 2009). P. Senge (2006, pp. 129-258) introduces the core disciplines for building the learning organization: personal mastery, which corresponds to the personal learning skills; mental models that imply a certain way of reality perception which should ‘unearth the internal picture’; shared vision – collective way of seeing the goal and team learning - recognizing the patterns of the team that enables learning together. Development of the company with the focus on those four elements helps to create a learning environment within the organization and change the way failures are treated in general.

5.1.1 Mastering self-knowledge

Since one of the elements of the organizational system is a social attribute (Cannon & Edmondson 2005, p. 302), a person is in the center of the learning process. In other words, creating a learning organizational environment starts with changing a person’s perception of reality within this organization.

The whole life of any person is a lifelong experience of failures, successes, learning and unlearning. Both good and bad moments of happiness and trauma amount to the development of the one’s identity. Within this frames, a person learns to cope one way
or another with a failure. Sometimes people make mistakes and when they enter the 
company they bring all the life experiences, all the fears and failures with them. That is 
what makes this part interesting. Within a company, there are structures, restrictions and 
opportunities that may not really exist in real life and these structures might to some 
extent provide a learning environment to a person. The leader’s role then is to be able to 
provide an environment, where individuals engaged in the company can deal with their 
life stories and also cope with their assignment and duty without fear within the 
company.

For a person a company might serve as a learning environment, in other words, ideally, 
any kind of failure might be transformed into knowledge, new goals, aims, expectations 
(Bennis 2007). The process of learning from failures starts, first of all, with a person or 
personal mastery. In order to learn from the environment, he or she should develop a 
decent self-knowledge. In this case, it is unlikely that a company can influence the 
relationship between a person and his or her perception of reality – the main role here is 
devoted to the desire for a change that a person has. In order to embody constant 
learning a person should remember two movements (Senge 2006, pp.131-132). The first 
one is to constantly remind oneself what exactly is important (ibid, 2006, pp. 131-132). 
When it comes to failures the main focus is directed on the failure itself and feelings a 
person has; however, when a person copes too much with the problems along one’s 
way, the true reason for going this way is forgotten (Senge 2006, pp.131-132). Thus, 
while coping with a failure the main attention should be devoted to the reasons of its 
happening as well as the strategies of overcoming it and better operating next time when 
other distractions should recede into the background (Senge 2006, pp.131-132). The 
second thing Senge (2006, p. 132) introduces is to see the reality clearer. This 
movement concerns the way a follower shares the information with his or her leader and 
how ignoring a failure worsens the situation (ibid, 2006, p. 132).

Another lessons that a person should take into account while treating a failure are 
introduced by Bennis and Townsend (1995, pp. 40-41). The first one is that people are 
their own best teachers and when they take responsibility for tasks and actions made, 
then they grow as both a person and a future leader. The second lesson contributing to 
the development of self-knowledge Bennis and Townsend call ‘people can learn 
highlights that talent is a relative concept, despite the fact that the civil society in the 
majority of cases still views a talent as something contained in person’s genes. As an 
example, students often explain their bad marks with a note that they are just not 
talented in math or they do not have a disposition for arts. However, does the concept of 
talent really exist or it is more a result of overlapping of nurturing and favorable 
external and internal factors (Dweck 2006)? In my mind, the phenomenon of talent is 
comparative and the history of success knows a lot of people who were ‘rejected’ at the 
early stage of their career like Sindi Sherman, Sidney Poitier, Jeraldin Page, Charles 
Darwin, Isaac Newton, Vincent Van Gogh etc. (Goudsouzian 2004; Ruse 2007; 
Christianson 2005; Gogh et al 2014). All of them have failed at the attempt to be 
acknowledged by the society as talented and outstanding people; nonetheless, after all, 
they were successful in what they were doing. It does not mean that in the beginning 
they were not talented. Thus, it is not usually a matter of talent but rather a well-
developed level of intelligence that allows a person to analogize, arrive at conclusions 
and not to give up. I believe that even a great talent can be lost by the pressure of 
different factors, but it also can be greatly developed by the person if he/she so desires. 
When a person realizes that a failure doesn’t actually equal to the lack of talent, then 
whole new possibilities of learning and exploring open up to one.
The last lesson to be mentioned is the concept of understanding. Bennis and Townsend (1995, p. 42) highlight the importance of true understanding coming directly from the reflection on the person’s experience. When it comes to failure it is vital to analyze the causal-and-effect linkage in order not to repeat the same mistake again (Bennis & Townsend 1995, p.44). Effective leaders try to really look at failure and encourage their followers to do so, to understand the role of their action (Bennis 2009, p.75). This is the part of not only organizational but also personal growth, which is a step in a way of becoming a leader.

5.1.2 Discovering the key elements

Nevertheless, a person, as well as the whole society has a certain mental model concerning the failures which is hard to change. That’s why the vicious circle of failure is such an issue. When it comes to mental models,

new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. (Senge 2006, p. 164)

In other words, people do have a certain vision of the world developed by the society, parents, books etc. where there might be a clear division what is bad and what is good. After all, the reality is perceived through certain ‘glasses’ of society. This corresponds to the paradox of the frames of reference: the more people know the less they question what they already know and the harder it is to think beyond the frames and to search for the alternative explanation of the situation (Weick 1995). People don’t really question why it is considered bad to fail, why a failure comes along with the feeling of sadness and helpfulness. Of course, this reaction seems natural because people don’t like failing, they don’t like not being able to do something. However, taking a more precise look shows that not every failure is followed by negativity. When a child learns to walk and falls down, he or she never thinks to oneself: ’maybe this isn’t for me’. In a young age people do not have restrictions and boundaries, their mind is free from prejudices, so they pursue their dreams and goals (Senge 2006, p.168). However, while growing up the mental model becomes implicit and starts to exist below the person’s awareness (Senge 2006, p. 168). That is the issue that needs to be and might be changed by the organization, e.g. by encouraging team learning and shared vision (ibid 2006, p. 175). Those two concepts help to save energy of the team members, to reduce stress and to perform better, because when a team is aligned, when there is a commonality of the purpose, then people complement each other’s effort (Senge 2006, p. 218). Like in a jazz band they ‘are in a groove’, which stands for playing as one, by reaching incredibly high goals together (ibid 2006, p. 220).

The organizational environment plays a big role in the perception of failure, which is also proven by the current research. For a leader, it is important not only to know how to handle failures himself/herself but also to teach his followers how to overcome missteps with the right attitude. Since one of the biggest issues in the vicious circle of failure are connected to the pressure at work, coming from both: colleagues and the boss, I believe that a vital strategy, in this case, is to encourage, first of all, trust.

People need a certain feeling of safety, especially when an environment and the world in general change with an incredible speed. The feeling of being able to trust established to some extent in the corporate culture makes them comfortable with sharing and being open (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p. 145). Trust is one of the elements that let the working atmosphere be healthy and provide support between a leader and followers.
Hackman and Johnson (2009, p.155) identify five key dimensions of organizational trust: competence, openness, and honesty, concern for employees, reliability and identification. These are the elements that might help to establish a comforting and favorable atmosphere at work, which influences the way followers treat their failures (ibid, 2009, p.156).

In order to establish a working system of failure perception a leader has to put trust in one’s followers and delegate (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p. 155). Since ‘the ultimate goal of leadership is empowering followers to take charge of their thoughts and behaviors’ (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.155), communication channels should be clearly seen. Leaders who eager to help their followers lead themselves might use the following three strategies (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.156): (1) Changing the structure of organization; (2) Changing the processes in the organization; and (3) Changing interpersonal communication patterns.

The first two strategies are connected to the way a company is functioning and the grounded rules it has established while the third one touches upon one of the issues discovered during the survey (ibid, 2009, p.157). Communication goes through all the processes in the company, playing the ground role in the ‘leader-follower’ and ‘follower-follower’ relationship. The lack of it or its ill quality is a problem that in both ways leads to failures (Nilsson & Waldemarson 2013). When there is no communication between whether a leader and his followers or among the followers the knowledge that everyone owns has blank parts that lead to a failure in the end (Nilsson & Waldemarson 2013). In the case of ill-communication, the absence of learning environment is almost guaranteed (ibid, 2013). Transformational leaders remain in the constant conversation with their followers in order to study the past experience together and determine the cues and reasons of the failures and success (Bennis & Nanus 2005). From the perspective of failure perception, one of the main goals of leaders is to develop confidence in their followers (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.168). The tools to be used to serve that function are active listening, encouragement of followers to solve issues by themselves, a delegation of the new projects after the previous failure, open-door policy, complementing initiatives and expressing confidence in employees (ibid, 2009, p.168). In order not to be stuck in the situation where followers are playing it safe while overcoming a failure, a leader has to play the facilitation role and be in a constant interaction with his followers (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p. 170; Bennis & Nanus 2005). In this case, they feel support, which will make them feel more confident and safe to some extent. As for the delegation of the new projects after a failure, this is important to show to the follower that the trust was not harmed and the leader still has faith in him or her (Hackman & Johnson 2009, p.170). According to Manz and Sims (2001 cited in Stewart et al 2011), followers can learn to lead themselves without the guidance of those in authority if they become self-disciplined, find rewards in tasks and adopt positive thoughts patterns. So, when they gain those qualities the mission of the leader to grow leaders out of followers is coming to an end (Nader, n.d.).

The manner in which a leader communicates is less important, than the content of the message and its impact (Baldoni 2003, p. 132). When there is a certain level of trust and established a communicational atmosphere in the company it does not only help followers feel more comfortable and accepted but also encourages an open feedback both ways (ibid 2003, p.132). ‘Effective communications is a two-way street’ (Baldoni 2003, p. 57), in cases where the respondents aren’t comfortable confronting a leader or sharing with him/her their vision of the situation they feel devastated when a failure happens, and the feeling that they might be able to avoid it contributes to the negative
The communication between a leader and a follower should be established that way, where a follower can voice his/her opinion and provide additional ideas to the leader’s message and vision (Baldoni 2003). The encouragement of feedback not only helps followers to be heard but also enables them to take ownership of the idea and to be participative even when the risk is involved (Baldoni 2003).

Establishing grounded rules that confirm that delivering ‘bad news’ is acceptable and sometimes even is encouraged helps the leaders not only to stay in touch but also show that it is safe to contribute to the processes of the company (Bennis & Nanus 2005). However, there are two things that close this communication channel. First, is the lack of response, which means that even when a leader encourages feedback he fails to listen to it and to give a certain reaction (Ellis 2009). The second is the fear of condor: followers don’t want to put their career in jeopardy, which means that due to their feeling of self-preservation they choose to stay positive and silent when it is time to give feedback (Ellis 2009). Thus, those two limitations should be taken into consideration while creating the strategy of learning environment development.

In order to draw a line under the lessons learned I suggest taking a look at the three steps of making a failure acceptable introduced by C. Li (2011). These strategies might help to avoid the big consumption of energy and the stress when a person tries to avoid failures. First of all, she advises creating a culture of sharing success and failure, which implies that employees are part of the business assessment and set the stage for the upcoming failures with the lead of CEO. The sharing culture might not only help to produce more knowledge and insights, which partially can help with facing the challenges, but also establish trusting relations when it comes to failure. The second step is to reward the risk-taking or at least to make it clear in the company’s culture that risking is a part of development. It is an important move since the majority of people are afraid of making actions that don’t have a high chance of success, which might be proved by the survey conducted in current research, where almost 75% of respondents opt for safety and clear outcome. When people stay on the safe side in business the company starts to be limited in opportunities. Nevertheless, the risks should also have the borders, which is the third step advised in the article. The limits of the actions will identify what risks and failures are acceptable and what will happen in the case of stepping out of the box.

All in all, there has never been a greater need for creating an organizational environment favorable for failing and learning than there is today. Individual and team learning is a key of getting experienced even when it comes to going through unpleasant situations. At this point leaders are like directors in the film production: they should have a certain scenario or a vision of actually making the potential experience real.

5.2 Lessons to be learned: exploring leaders’ experience

The main aim of this chapter is to explore the actual strategies leaders use to create a favorable environment for their followers. In order to do so I interview people having a leadership role to share their personal experience with me, talk about the atmosphere they are encouraging as well as the strategies and the approaches they use towards learning from failure. However, for a start, I want to bring the insight from the webinar concerning the development of good leadership habits.

Miller (ed. 2016) shares that such skills as listening to learn, inquiring for insight, telling your truth and expressing the confidence must be developed by a leader at the early stage of his or her career. A leader can influence one’s followers by true listening
and making them feel valued, letting them share their ideas, which might be very important (Miller ed. 2016). If leaders listen to learn, then they can find out information that will bring them to the better decision and better results (Miller ed. 2016). Moreover, it creates more positive work relationships. The second skill helps leaders get valuable information by asking open-ended questions, which make the followers think, how they would do things differently, and generate ideas (Miller ed. 2016). While conducting interviews for the current research I find it necessary to ask open-ended questions, so I can get valuable and detailed information from the respondents (Miller ed. 2016). Then, I could also see that an answer is getting more fruitful and detailed. Giving feedback or telling your truth stimulates the learning process of followers by directing them towards the experience they get from the mistakes (Miller ed. 2016). Moreover, Miller (ed. 2016) states that being able and being willing to say what needs to be said helps people move forward; and expressing confidence in followers, first of all, shows that the leader is listening, gives the followers energy, encourages effort and contributes to the feeling of trust, because ‘what gets recognized – gets repeated’. The poll that all the attendants of the webinar fulfilled showed that 33% of people think that the most difficult skills for new managers are listening to learn and telling your truth, which, I believe, also corresponds to the results of this thesis research. The inability of a leader to listen and to give a proper feedback contributes to the pressure coming from him or her as well as develops embittered relations between him or her and the followers. Therefore, the insights of leaders are very valuable.

First of all, it is vital to go back to of failure in order to find out the difference in perception between followers and leaders. I believe that the meaning a person implies in it is one of the best ways to describe one's attitude towards a failure and issues connected to it.
Both leaders and followers agree that failure shows missing parts. However, overall the way leaders perceive failures differs. The main focus in case of leaders seems to be addressed majorly to the learning element of failure and its inevitability. Therefore, one of the assumptions that might occur is that failure perception is subject to knowledge and experience of the person.

**Figure 10: The concept of ‘failure’ as it is experienced from the leaders’ perspective**

(Author’s chart: Original Figure)

**Figure 11: Comparison of followers’ and leaders’ concept of failure**

(Author’s chart: Original Figure)
While discussing with leaders main outcomes of the research, which is vicious circle and majorly the pressure coming from the environment, they highlight that the main problems from their perspective are usually connected to the productivity pressure, non-transparency in communication with the boss both ways and inequality between the ambitions and resources. Thus, the main strategies they use to encourage a better-working atmosphere are focusing on the fact that they (leaders and followers) are usually ‘all in it together’ and can solve problems while establishing good communication (Morel 2016, 26 March).

People are anxious when they interact with me and can’t read me and understand where I am coming from, what I am after and how I am willing to take them with me. So, that is why aligning and opening on expectations and mutual support is critical. Finally, people are anxious when they start speculating about what can happen to them - their jobs when an external incident happens - they expect serenity and perspective from leadership. (Morel 2016, 26 March; 25 April)

Communicating and sharing a vision with followers might be inevitable when they do not feel safe at work and have questions. Then, those blank spots frequently reasoning the misinterpretation of the situation are fulfilled. Despite this fact, people are afraid to ask questions and clarify an issue once again avoiding the situations of putting themselves in a ‘vulnerable’ position. The leaders, on the contrary, say that when something goes off the plan – talking to each other helps regulate the issue.

Of course, followers fail but when working with me they need to report it at early stages and ask for help within the team, or at least me. Then, I will help them to reorient themselves to other people that could help. On the other hand, it is hard for me to accept a failure when a person didn’t ask for help – this is an issue of the older work generation. They have learned to keep up appearances and to solve problems by themselves. When they realize that they cannot do it – the failure is already crucial. (Pech 2016, 16 April)

The importance of trust and communication that Hackman and Johnson (2009) state in their studies is very acute nowadays. Ignoring and keeping silence when a failure happens might be one of the worst things from leaders’ perspective (Pech 2016, 16 April). They don’t know the real situation and live up to illusions built on followers’ silence – so, after all, they fail together missing the chance to correct the situation. Thus, putting up an environment where followers feel secure to declare problems, to test new things, to talk and get support from other team members is a big step in creating a learning environment.

Supporting one of the Senge’s (2006) core disciplines – shared vision - Pucci Daniele (2016, 8 May) suggests having a certain algorithm or scheme of working. Especially when the team is new or has newcomers from other companies the strategy allows followers, first of all, to see what exactly a leader is expecting from them and, secondly, to have a vision of the process with bullet points.

One of the important things, when you work with people, is to give them a structure, how we are going to approach a certain type of work and stress that point over and over again. I think that in a team giving a vision of how we are going to do this, how we are going to deliver is very vital not because you need to give people a mindset of doing things: they will still proceed in their own way. However, I believe that especially when you are accountable for a piece of work as a leader with the business, you need to make sure that everything finds its place: for an instant if you do something and that something is not approved by somebody else you can get in trouble. (Pucci Daniele 2016, 8 May)
An algorithm or a vision is ‘a flashlight’ for a follower and ‘a safety belt’ for a company. In general, the main aim of it is to encourage common vision reached by different perspectives. It provides followers with a certain safety while giving them freedom at operating; and insures the process of business functioning.

For a leader managing people is also a learning process, where one fails and succeeds. The leaders highlight the necessity to adapt both to the situation as well as to a person.

The first person that I started managing was an Indian guy who joined the company at the early stage. Every time that I would let him notice that something went wrong he would get very disappointed. I saw that he was getting really upset about it, and then I also felt bad. So, I tried to change my approach and have learned now how to deal with it. He was the first resource that I was managing and that was a learning experience for me as well. (Pucci Daniele 2016, 8 May)

Changing the approaches is necessary because a leader deals with different types of people: with various backgrounds, experience and personality – there might not be one way that works for everyone. A leaders’ role is to encourage a person to move forward and not to scare.

Even if I am angry or frustrated with their failure I must remain calm in order not to scare co-workers from informing me about their mistake; otherwise, next time they will be afraid to share with me and I don’t want that. (Pasanen 2016, 24 April)

When followers come to a leader, he/she should try to adapt the communication approach: first, to a person with whom one is dealing, and, then, to the situation itself. When working with people the strategy is of great importance. Generally, a leader should estimate what kind of his/her reaction will have the best outcome out of a failure. This is what coaches do with athletes: sometimes it is inevitable to show the faith in a person, and sometimes a small fear of failure might serve as a good motivation.

The last point that I want to highlight, and I believe this is a great strategy not only to set up a learning environment but also to keep a person motivated, is expressing trust and appealing to the strengths and willingness of followers.

One of the employees that I am working with right now has failed the task that I delegated to him, which was a part of the routine job. Even though that discredited him in my eyes to some extent, I didn’t stop giving him assignments of different importance. After a while, I have started noticing that when I give him more responsibility he feels more inspired and gives me new and very useful information. I have discovered that he was a type of person who likes to have authority even if he doesn’t. Maybe in a previous team, he was leading some type of work. That is why I have decided to focus on his strengths. I believe that especially when the level of commitment tends to decrease, the leaders should focus on and understand which strengths a person from their team has and think how exactly they can empower those strengths in order to make the team work better. (Pucci Daniele 2016, 8 May)

Letting people do what they feel confident about is a good strategy to encourage their motivation because they are already interested in the progress, they want to develop, to be better and the failure is likely to be treated as an experience when there is a challenge. However, I am convinced that knowing weaknesses and working on them should also be part of the working process.
When I have a group of volunteers working with me on the competitions I try to set up teams with the people of diverse strengths and weaknesses. So, that when they work together they don’t compete but rather support each other. When the follower is struggling to fulfill a task but he or she has a potential, then assigning this task to another person is not the best idea to my mind. I would rather let my followers challenge themselves, sometimes even fail if it is needed and not crucial, but then they will develop strengths from the weakness and come out more confident and powerful. Moreover, they can also turn for help within the team or with me. (Touvet-Fahmy 2016, 13 April)

I believe that especially in a diverse team it is important to have an environment of ‘shared learning; shared knowledge’, like a mix of Senge’s (2006) core disciplines ‘shared vision’ and ‘team learning’. Then, the group overcomes failures together, faces them together and learns together. The support that might and should be established within a team is a big step in creating a learning environment.

So, the findings from the interviews conducted suggest that in general, the strategies of developing conditions for learning from failures focus around those seven: focusing on strengths of followers, adapting approach of working with people, sharing the vision of the working process, listening and giving feedback, asking for the insights, communicating and expressing confidence.

Figure 12: Seven leaders’ strategies for developing a positive learning management environment

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<tr>
<td>Focus on strengths but don't forget about weaknesses</td>
<td>Adapt your approach to follower and situation</td>
<td>Introduce a vision of the process to your followers</td>
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<tr>
<th>L</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>R</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listen to learn, ask questions and tell your truth</td>
<td>Utilize the insights</td>
<td>Require open communication</td>
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<th>E</th>
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<tr>
<td>Express confidence</td>
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(Author’s chart: Original Figure)

In my opinion, the insights shared by the leaders in this chapter are a perfect example of well-developed strategies. It is insightful and beneficial to see how theories introduced by various scholars might be put into practice. The interviews with leaders have strong connection to the theoretical framework. First of all, their perception of failure contributes to the out-of-dateness of the binary thinking concerning the relation failure-success. Secondly, they introduce strategies supporting Senge (2006), Hackman and Johnson (2009), Bennis (2009) and majorly highlight the importance of self-development. Since leaders and scholars use multitude of sports and music metaphors, it might be interesting to investigate those spheres from the perspective of self-leadership and failures.
5.3 Beyond the lessons learned: opening an invisible window of failure coming from sports, music, acting and writing

Although business, success, and failures are usually standing in one line, there are professions where overcoming a failure is considered to be a part of daily routine. It means that people are aiming at goals with the high risk by constantly challenging themselves. Being an athlete, a musician, a writer and an actor implies that one builds one’s way to success by coping with failures on one’s way. Those professions are much more sensitive to a failure because there is not only high competition but also a pressure coming from a couch, an audience, other team players and co-workers, and, moreover, there is also no beaten trail – they have to discover what works for them and what doesn’t by themselves, using a ‘trial and error’ method.

In order to understand the feelings and emotions while facing challenges, as well as the ways of constantly overcoming fears and the pressure, I talk to the people of my age who devote themselves to the professional career of sports, music, acting and writing, and call them ‘professions sensitive to failures’.

The results of the interviews are not only useful to understanding of the concept of failure and its perception, I believe that the insights that I get from the interviewees might serve as a great inspiration. On the basis of data, I highlight the key aspects collected from the interviews in order to build concepts concerning the topic of failure perception.

Maehr and Nichols (1980) described success and failure in sports as psychological states rather than reflecting objective levels of performance, which, I believe, might also be applicable for acting, writing and singing. Thus, the first thing I want to do is to draw the attention back again to the phenomenon of ‘failure’. This is the first thing that I discuss with the interviewees in order to understand what sense they make out of this word, what meaning they imply in the concept of failure, to avoid confusion while discussing the topic. In general, the concept is described quite similar; however, each interviewee adds some specification and detail that allows me to understand his/her attitude towards it better. If I put together all the elements mentioned in the interviews, the reader might see how the term ‘failure’ is perceived by people of professions with a strong connection to failures.
Figure 13: The concept of ‘failure’ as it is experienced by people, whose profession is connected to sports, music, acting and writing

When in follower’s concept of failure in the majority of cases the elements are linked to the negative experience - ‘not succeeding’, ‘not doing it right’, ‘not living up to expectations’; in leaders’ concept of failure the main focus is an experience that a person gets and the learning element of the failure, in the spheres like sports, music, acting and writing a failure is usually connected to the overcoming oneself and moving forward with a new strength. Therefore, in case of ‘professions sensitive to failures’ the concept of failure is more connected to motivation or a staging point – ‘might happen’, ‘challenges a person’, ‘motivates to train harder’. That vision should be implemented and developed in business sphere as well.

Figure 14: Comparison of followers’, leaders’, athletes’ concepts of failure
What I also find interesting while talking to the interviewees is that they usually avoid using a term ‘failure’ by replacing it with other words. In Russian language, people have several translations of the term ‘failure’ that might be measured differently. A person can use a word equal to the meaning ‘a crash’, ‘a catastrophe’ or the ones likewise ‘unluck’, ‘a challenge’ however, in English they would all be equal to a failure. The words that the interviewees are using when they are talking about failures usually resemble the words ‘a misstep’ and ‘an experience’. I believe that this should also serve as an indicial factor of their attitude towards failures.

The following table gives a brief overview of the seven people I interview with a description of their professional sphere.

Table 3: The interviewees in the third phase of the thesis research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Professional sphere</th>
<th>Team player/Solo performer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria Pesova</td>
<td>Horseracing (Advanced degree in showjumping)</td>
<td>Solo performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander Suvorov</td>
<td>Acting</td>
<td>Part of a theater crew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladislav Sofronov</td>
<td>Snowboarding / Freestyle (PRO rider)</td>
<td>Solo and team performer/ junior athletes trainer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denis Alferov</td>
<td>Music and singing</td>
<td>Performs solo and as part of the band ‘As All Alone’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirill Kireev</td>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>Regional Hockey Team – bronze medalist of Russian Championship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitalia Talanina</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Part of team writers for the InvoiseMagazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan Talanin</td>
<td>Music (Bandoneonist)</td>
<td>Performs with a music band, leading solo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first thing to be discussed is a motivation after a failure and how people of those professions keep oneself on track. The answers concerning this matter are quite similar among the interviewees with the main point that all the failures should stimulate a person to try harder. Combining the input to this topic of the interviewees I may say that to overcome a failure, first of all, a person should see an onward movement and progression, treating a failure as a step to becoming stronger. When a person has an understanding that he or she isn’t worse than those people who have managed to reach the goal, that there is still a lot to learn and that he or she has already put a lot of effort, then the failure is high likely to be treated as an experience. Moreover, to overcome one’s failures a great role plays the support from the close people (for athletes it is a coach, a team, a family; for musicians – a director, other members of the band etc.) and the love a person has to what he or she is doing. I believe that the last thing is very important, because when people enjoy what they do, when they want to progress in it and do not doubt themselves, then they look forward linking their actions with the experience they already have and analyzing how to reach the goal and fulfill the tasks in a better way.

I was trying to get into the school of theater arts for three years. In the first year I failed the first stage in every university right away except for one (there I failed at the second stage). That gave me the hope that this is possible for me. The next year I failed
everywhere but unlike the previous year, I have decided to apply for the less prestigious schools as well. When I got in one of them, I studied there within one year and then applied to the best theater school in Moscow and got in. (Suvorov 2016, 22 April)

As in an example of H. Ford (see 3.4) Suvorov constantly tries to reach his goal. That is to say that sometimes when failing it is vital to cut the way into small goals: taking a presidential post is possible but not out of the blue. When a person sees reaching his/her final goal as a journey containing small steps, then, first, failures start to be not that crucial as before, second, ‘the way’ is both flexible and controlled. Hackman and Johnson (2009, p.259) support the point formulated by A. Suvorov and say that in business especially in order to get rid of the fear of failure a person should enjoy the work that he or she is going and to feel competent in it. Then, when a person feels control and knowledge of the sphere, when a mistake happens, he or she is most likely to reflect on it and perceive it as another source of knowledge. Moreover, love to the job also involves a strategy of positive-thinking to some extent. That way of thinking fosters not only learning skills but also self-leadership via developing self-confidence. Thinking in terms of opportunities rather than from limitations might help to reflect on the happened failure as if it is a chance to fill in the blank sides and improve the project.

The fields, where professions are sensitive to failures, are categorical, especially, when it comes to sports: the outcome of the competition is always clear: winner and losers. In business sphere, the borders might be blurrier but the outcome is still the same. A moment when a person sees that the result of the certain actions is unlikely to be successful is a road junction that predestinates the failure treatment. The interviewees highlight the fact that a failure or some kind of derailment shouldn’t be ignored but recognized with the intention to make a change immediately.

Giving up means that you have already lost and failed since you don’t even try to modify the situation. When you see that the outcome isn’t the best, the important thing is to focus yourself on the quality and take everything you can out of the failure. (Pesova 2016, 22 April)

While a snowboard PRO rider V. Sofropov (2016, 22 April) also adds that being the best among the weak competitors equals to a failure and only supports athlete’s ego when competing with the best not only challenges a person but pushes him to perform better. In my experience the challenges a person dares to take describes him or her in the best way, in other words, it is in the person’s interest to take a certain risk at the job. I would say that usually an employer, a leader is interested in people who can act differently and take a risk even though they don’t say about it openly.

Fear and stress are natural feelings that might worsen an issue when they are not controlled. When it comes to stress all the interviewees respond that stress is a matter of a habit. ‘In my opinion, stress never helps and influences dramatically the spirit of people. You can’t overcome it but you can control it’, says V. Sofronov (2016, 22 April).

Of course, stress influences the person and usually, it is a bad one. For me, it is important to have a ritual after which you come into play and forget about extraneous issues. In our team we were eating all together chocolate bars half an hour before the game – that is just a symbol but you automatically feel support, you see that you are a team. (Kireev 2016, 22 April)
While facing stress at work it is comforting to feel a certain amount of support from others. For instance, after closing a deal or finishing a work before a deadline having ‘a union’, which can be also a ritual, might help to keep a person on track and to carry this feeling of support to the next ‘stressful situation’. During the competitions, performances and interviews a feeling of fear also exist. However, when it is a high time to act there is no place for it, otherwise a person is distracted and does not think clearly, which corresponds to the theory of Wallenda Factor (see 3.4).

If I think how not to play a note wrong, then my performance will lack the personal aspect, it will become dry and not interesting to listen. The energy must be devoted to doing your best, and the fear wastes the potential of the good performance. (Talin 2016, 25 April)

In business having a clear vision helps overcome not only failures but the fears connected to them, in general, a person might save his/her energy to excessive stress on the way.

After talking about overcoming and facing the failure, coping with stress and fear, the last thing that I am eager to discuss is the pressure coming from others. Some of the interviewees admit that sometimes ‘a failure’ is labeled to them by the society, who watches a game or a performance from the stadium or on TV.

In almost every sphere there is competition, there are people who watch your performance and expect you to fail. When you are acting solo, the best thing is to let this pressure be behind an invisible wall and concentrate your whole attention to the performance. After all, if you listen to provocation coming from others then they will win. (Pesova 2016, 22 April)

The pressure from ‘outside’ is another distraction that makes a person lose the vision of a goal. Like Cannon and Edmondson (2005) and Winch (2013) highlight people normally expect approbation, they care about what others think and try to prove something to the world. This might be the moment when they start seeing a failure as an enemy, influencing their ‘appearance’. Ironically, but in a sphere where a person competes with others to be better, like sports, for an athlete, the main aim is to be the best version of oneself. What I discovered from talking to the interviewees is that they compete with oneself, they overcome the fear to prove to, first of all, oneself that they can do that. I believe this is a spirit that should be brought to some extent to business and everyday life. The pressure coming from the co-workers and a leader is in the majority cases unhealthy and might negatively affect the performance. Thus, I believe that the feeling of unity and solidarity is one of the things that a company should work in its corporate culture.

Therefore, summing up the outcomes of the interviews I suggest going back to the concept of ‘failure circle’ and draw there the elements that support a person while facing a failure and help him or her overcome the fear of it.
Collecting all the elements mentioned by athletes, musicians, actors and writers in question allows building not a vicious but a virtuous circle of failure, where the elements support each other in order to fight to the certain extent the fear of failure and develop the learning mindset. The connections among each of the elements make their aggregate influence bigger; that is why they might be applicable in the strategies to change the issue of the vicious circle of failure.
Therefore, elements of the virtuous circle, which are a vision or a mindset, help a person to create a learning environment for failures. For instance, loving the job might help a person to reduce one’s anxiety of being fired and the necessity to prove somebody his/her skills because the person enjoys what one is doing and other things recede into
the background. Consequently, the experience of professions constantly dealing with failures might help to change the hostile environment for failure in business.

5.4 Summarizing the thoughts and beyond

In order to help followers overcome failures and a fear of it, a company should create a certain environment favoring making mistakes. This is a learning environment. Leaders and scholars bring strategies that an enterprise might use to change the way people employed by that company overcome of failures. The main ideas of scholars circle around the four core concepts introduced by Senge (2006): personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. The connection between the scholars and leaders might be also clearly seen. The leaders’ experience includes the strategies, connected mainly to the importance of communication and trust that team members have in each other. Among the main problems contributing to the ill perception of failure, leaders name productivity pressure, non-transparency in communication with the boss both ways and inequality between the ambitions and resources.

Athletes, musicians, actors, and writers – representatives of the professions, which I call ‘sensitive to failures’ share the experience that might be taken as an example by the individuals to change the vicious circle of failure developed by the pressure of the organizational environment. In the majority of cases the interviewees admit that a great importance plays an ability to treat a failure as a step on the way to success and a source of the knowledge, and to leave the pressure behind the wall following the main goal and vision.
6 Conclusion

Even though the learning benefit of failure is well-known, companies and leaders invest a lot of effort and money to avoid them. Furthermore, people also have a certain fear of how their leader will react on their failures. Acknowledging and accepting failures might be a catalyst for innovation, open new alternatives and boost creativity. Moreover, people do accept failure as a learning spiral on the subconscious level, however the influence of environment is strong enough to reverse this perception. In order to change the role of failure in humans’ life a mankind needs a shift in how society sees and treats a failure, because these are exactly the forces that influence the way a failure is perceived. Therefore, this thesis aims at examining the organizational factors influencing failure perception as well as strategies of shifting failure into learning environment.

6.1 Taking a step back

A role of failure in business has been discussed multiple times and the importance of it should not be downplayed. In this thesis, I try to look at failure from the perspective of its perception, because, after all, it is really challenging to avoid failures in our life and a person should know how to get up in the best way after a fall. Failures help a person get a certain conditioning for toughness; like in boxing training they make him or her stronger in order to prepare to face bigger challenges in the future.

On the other hand, the strategy of avoiding failures equals to playing it safe and acting without any risks. After all, when a moment of failure comes a person or a company is not prepared to take this challenge and fails badly and painfully, while the recovery process consumes significant amount of time. Thus, a role of failing right is as important as any other activity that company does, because this is the moment that happens sooner or later.

When doing the research for the thesis my aim is to investigate what factors might influence a person’s perception of failure and how the experience of others might help to change it. It is impossible to assess the importance of the knowledge gathered from the interviewees. The insights from followers, leaders and people of different professions let take a look at a failure how it is, at emotions of people connected to it and at their fears.

The most interesting thing for me during the study is that in the majority of cases people do understand on a conscious level that failures should be treated as an experience but the environment still provokes another reaction. Among the factors influencing individual’s perception of failure might be found the pressure from a leader and colleagues, the anxiety connected to the fear of being fired, to the fear of showing oneself vulnerable, the relations at work etc. All those factors might one way or another be connected to three main categories: the relation between a person and a leader, between a person and business culture and between a person and colleagues.

When it comes to failures a lot is connected to, first, the willingness of a person to change the situation and, second, the ability of the company to contribute to this change. However, since there are factors connected to the organization that influence failure perception; then, the organization might have a power to change the relationship between an individual and a failure. Therefore, the first thing a company might do is to create a learning environment, which helps the development of ‘tough’ people who are
ready to risk and to learn. In order to do that leaders might use the strategies already introduced by effective leaders or to transfer the knowledge from another spheres.

For instance, in order to change the concept of ‘vicious circle’ companies might learn from the experience of the professions sensitive to failures, such as athletes, musicians, actors and writers, by focusing on the elements of the ‘virtuous circle’ in their strategies.

While doing a literature review on the topic of failure importance I see how much is still inexplicable and unstudied but, I believe, that I slightly contributed to the clarification of this topic. These findings do not imply that the factors mentioned in the fourth chapter like pressure from co-workers and boss, anxiety for being fired, vulnerability when asking help etc. certainly reside in every enterprise. Conversely, I want to acknowledge that the study examines in general the evidence of factors influencing failure perception, which include above mentioned organizational factors.

6.2 Let me fly up
Therefore, if the benefits of learning from failure are so clear, why it is still such a big issue for the majority of companies? There are companies resisting ‘to encourage personal mastery’, there are companies that do not see the importance of putting some effort into the change of failure perception by followers and of a certain mindset of leaders.

First of all, although the necessity of doing is evident in the materialistic world such as ours every benefit should be measurable and proved. Unfortunately, the necessity to create a learning environment at the company cannot be assessed with numbers, and an enterprise sees only a potential opportunity, which happens to be an issue (Dolles and Soderman 2011, p. 223). Another barrier to learning from failure might be that sometimes leaders are optimistic and, then, they attribute the performance to the wrong reasons and causes (Dolles and Soderman 2011, p. 223). Moreover, in the companies promoting people who lead failure-free activity followers avoid admitting failures until it is too late. Another factor reducing the chance of implementing the strategy of creating a learning environment is the amount of energy and funds consumption of the process and absence of immediate ROI, which makes a company invest in something different (Dolles and Soderman 2011, p. 223).

Nevertheless, there are always pioneers, who risk, win and show the public example of the benefits. Those companies are famous for innovations and creativity and make it desirable to work for them. The innovational (especially American companies) act as ‘trend-setters’ encouraging other companies by the pressure of the competition and certain immigration of workforce to follow their route.

As for this research, the development of it has been an experience to learn the failure from the inside: from feelings and emotions of followers, from the experience of leaders, from inspiring stories of athletes, musicians, actors and writers. I have not only got an idea about the complexity of the concept of failure but also had an opportunity to implement all the new knowledge into practice. What I have figured out is that, in general, I fail every day just in different scale – and that is quite normal for an ordinary human being. However, what makes me really upset is not the failure itself but rather the moment when I understand that I have already had this failure some time ago and I have not learned anything. This is the worst part about failures perception. When one
experiences déjà vu and finds out that the last failure did not give one anything, the power of ‘lesson’ doubles, however, the self-esteem decreases with the lessons learned.

Thus, I can say that I have not only learned a lot about failures, its components, and actions connected to its treatment but I have also learned how to make me lead myself through the learning environment while failing.

6.3 Where would I fly further if given the possibility
The topic of failure is absolutely very bright and what I have summarized is not everything that can be said about failure as a whole and failure perception, in particular. Throughout the study, I have found some topics and questions that would be interesting to do a deeper research on.

First of all, I believe that after having a general idea about the ‘world of failure’ it would be reasonable to explore it further by looking precisely at some of the companies and try actually to estimate the benefit of the certain strategies and what works and what does not for them.

Then, the question of why companies still do not create a learning environment might be also interesting and beneficial to examine and investigate, since it will give an opportunity to change this issue.

Another issue that I have discovered while exploring the failure perception is lack of correlation between the existence of support of colleagues and the pressure coming from them. I find it interesting that the research of this thesis shows that the pressure influencing the failure perception is not decreasing with the increase of support from co-workers, therefore, the investigation of the reasons explaining that might also be useful.

I also think that it would be fruitful to take a more scrutinious look at failure perception from the psychological point of view and the perspective of the self-leadership, since dealing with failures is, first of all, a part of ‘war’ that every person has with inner-self.

To close this thesis, I have chosen a quote from Wilma Rudolf, an American track and field sprinter who reminds that the true intelligence is to stand up after falling.

‘Winning is great, sure, but if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday.’

Wilma Rudolf (n.d.)
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