Facing failure, the actor has two options: reject or accept the situation. Rejection will protect his emotional equilibrium, acceptance will question it. Failure could give rise to a feeling of guilt which will embitter the person to the point where psychological success will be near impossible. But having made a habit of success is also a serious handicap: when luck is no longer on your side, the disapprenticeship of success can be that much more painful.

It is unusual to deal with this subject – in any case, at least in management – but our observations concerning the careers of our students show that those that “make the difference” do not do so because of their appropriate behavior during success, but during their difficulties or failures. Those that succeed – according to their own standards – are those that get through difficulties better than others and are more open to change and therefore ready when favorable circumstances arrive. The way in which the experience of failure paves the road to success is a paradox. The principle of limited rationality explains that one decision is best only within a framework of choice that is limited in proximity to the decision-maker. Another limit to rationality must be specified: an action is only rational within the limits of the range of behaviors that is available, of which the actor is capable at the moment concerned. It is the emotional state of the subject that will define this capacity.

1. The Principle of Limited Behavioral Capacity

This principle is called the principle of limited behavioral capacity. Behavior is not like a piece of clothing, chosen in the morning standing in front of a closet of behaviors, or rather, yes it is, but the choice depends on our emotional framework at the moment. It is imposed on us and we don’t
have the possibility to “change” ourselves every two minutes, if the weather changes. Yet, in a board meeting, certain files are considered good weather, others, storms, some are very hot, others freezing …. In other words, we can’t resolve all situations successfully and it is important to learn how to integrate our failures …

2. The Feeling of Failure

2.1 Definition

The term “failure situation” is a misuse of the language, in that failure is not a situation, but a feeling, or more precisely, it is the psychological definition that we make of the situation. For a feeling of failure, there are three necessary conditions:

1. The existence of a deviation between the external situation and an internal norm.
2. The awareness of a link between the deviation and the actor.
3. A level of deviation that surpasses the personal norm, above which we experience feelings of failure.

For a feeling of failure to exist, the actor must feel personally implicated in the process, for example, believing himself to have been the source of the decisions or in judging himself responsible for not having stopped others’ bad decisions. Failure represents emotional production resulting from the confrontation between the person’s objectives, values, strategic choices and a unpredicted difficulty coming from the external environment that is in conflict with the outcome desired. Failure is essentially subjective. An organizational failure can be taken as a success by someone who had predicted it without being listened to.

▶ The success of a young man in an exam for an Ivy League school could be experienced as a failure by his friends. The marriage of a young girl could be felt as a failure by her mother who will lose her child. A young man’s car accident could be felt as a terrible failure by the father who had bought the car for him …