



# FAILING FORWARD INTO THE NEW YEAR

BY NA'ILAH AMARU

Every New Year brings an opportunity for reflection and resolutions. How we reflect and how we pursue our resolutions has a significant impact on our personal and professional development. We welcome January with cheers and a clean slate full of possibility. Yet the dreams, plans, and hopes we held so tightly, somehow slip away from us and fade into the chaos of life.

Even in the bright hope of a New Year, most of us will encounter moments of failure and for many of us it is our failures that soon begin to shadow our tomorrows. Nevertheless, it is when we fall short and find ways for defeat to become the building blocks of our tomorrows that we move forward in our leadership journey.

I have failed miserably, deeply, and often in life. But I have learned that wrapped around the sting of defeat there is always a lesson that can lead us towards the achievement of our life goals. Accountability and forgiveness are two of those hard-earned lessons. Incomplete plans, broken resolutions, and failed goals all provide opportunity for growth, but only if we hold ourselves accountable and forgive ourselves through the failures.

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS

### 1. ACCOUNTABILITY

Being held accountable can be a terrifying notion. To acknowledge we are responsible for our achievements suggests that we are also responsible for our failures, and that recognition threatens the validity of any excuse we create as to why we failed. But we did fail, and accountability is a personal endeavor that requires us to take responsibility for that failure.

Once we take ownership of our shortcomings, we wield a certain power. That power comes from within and changes how we view failure, and how we respond to it. The choice is ours and we get to choose.

In December of 2006, I graduated with my Masters of Public Administration from the University of Texas with a strong academic record, moved to a different state to begin

another graduate program at my dream school, started a new job in this new state, and was excited about the possibility of my tomorrows. In January of 2007, I enrolled in my first semester of my second masters program at my dream school. Like so many others, I have never been a good test taker on standardized exams due to my low GRE scores, I was provisionally admitted to the Masters of Public Policy program.

My graduate school experience was different this time. I carried a full time course load, struggled with balancing a full-time job, and ever the ambitious student, I tackled my most difficult classes first.

I was kicked out of the program after my first semester. I was devastated. I had uprooted my life, crossed state lines, and placed my faith in my academic acumen to succeed. But I failed — because I received

a B- in a class that I was required to receive at least a B; because I couldn't figure out my work/school balance in time, because I didn't do what I had to do in order to succeed. And that was on me.

As a result, I had to decide how I was going to face my failure. I could fall down or I could fail forward. Should I give up on my dream of pursuing my educational goals, or embrace my failure, figure out the lesson, and live like I learned it?

I decided to fail forward. Succumbing to the woe-is-me mindset and looking for circumstances to blame is the easy route. Nonetheless, it is a route that will lead you nowhere at best, and into dark places that offer no escape at worst. Holding ourselves accountable for our failures paves a new path that leads us deeper into our leadership journey — and it is our failures that light the way.



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Previously Na'ilah served as policy advisor to former Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, legislative aide to U.S. Congressman John Lewis, and as executive director of the New York City Council's Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus. She is also a distinguished Army veteran and ammunition specialist who has served in Iraq and, among other military accomplishments, was awarded an Army Commendation Medal for exemplary service.

Currently, Na'ilah consults with community-based organizations on issue-based and legislative campaigns, and with non-profits to help maximize their social impact by providing expertise in strategic planning, program evaluation, and operations analysis. She also develops and facilitates workshops that support individuals to take on leadership roles in their communities.

She is a proud graduate of the University of Texas, Georgia State University, and Hunter College and is based in Brooklyn, New York.

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## 2. FORGIVENESS THROUGH OUR FAILURES

Just as we must lean into our defeats and accept responsibility for our decisions and our actions, it is just as important that we learn to forgive ourselves for our failures. We are taught to believe that failure is an event to be ashamed of, however, I view failure as an experience that brings us closer to achieving success — however we choose to define it.

When I was kicked out of graduate school for poor academic performance, I lost confidence in my academic abilities, I was angry at myself and I was ashamed. Why did I enroll in the hardest class first? Why didn't I figure out my work/school balance sooner? Why couldn't I be a better test taker?

Yet the answers to my questions while insightful, would be of no value if I did not begin the process of forgiving myself. Forgiveness creates space for us to reflect, heal, and move forward. But it is a process, and one that can only begin with us.

By intentionally stepping into (and through) our shame, our anger, and our disappointment, we begin a journey that leads us to a fuller version of ourselves. If

I had held onto the failure, I would have been crippled by the weight of its emotional and psychological burden. Most importantly, I certainly would not be where I am today: living my best life on the other side of that failure.

Over the summer, I reapplied to the same program that I failed out of, and I am proud to share that I graduated with academic honors. However, more important than the degree and more memorable than the pomp and circumstance of graduation, was the journey that led to my walk across the stage. It was a journey that began with a first step of self-forgiveness for my failure of not living up to my own expectations.

## 3. FAILING FORWARD

As we begin yet another trip around the sun, remember that when we fall short (and we will) we can choose to fall down or fail forward. Accountability and forgiveness allows us to accept our failures and guide us with lessons learned that will lead to success in the future. The more you fail, the more you succeed. The building blocks of success are rooted in failure, so do not feel ashamed to fail hard. The victory is in moving forward.