



The Risky Six: Keys to Shed Fear & Take Smart Risks

Use these practices to overcome fear and help your organization be the best it can be.

By Lei Wang

Like all knowledge, fear is learned. That's good news, because it means your fear and anxieties can be unlearned. The ability to combat fear grows through exercise. Through deliberate practice, you can become courageous and take informed risks. Train yourself to do so with these keys:

1. Harness Fear's Positive Power

Fear is an extremely powerful emotion — and, thus, a powerful motivational tool. When facing fear, the normal response is fight-or-flight. Flight lets fear and worry take control of your mind. Fight turns fear into a positive risk-management response, forcing you to focus and actively do your best to overcome the situation.

“Waiting diminishes the chance for success.”

When you take a leap of faith to confront a new challenge, imagine you have no opportunity to back out. Take that first step, and turn your dread into a positive strength that compels you to make your best effort.

2. Act Early, Act Decisively

Rather than waiting until your organization becomes dispensable, proactively manage its growth. Anticipate problems and dangers before they occur.

Once danger does arrive, it's often too late to do much in response. Act early, because waiting diminishes the chance for success.

3. Separate Probability from Consequences

Many working professionals are afraid of taking risks because the probability of success appears low and the consequences of failure are frightening. When you think about the result of failure, it's important to recognize the difference between the *immediate* consequences and the *ultimate* consequences.

Yes, the probability that a new startup will succeed is low, and the immediate consequence could be losing money. For any new program launch, there's a chance of defeat. But that's only temporary. Not taking the risk means that the ultimate consequence is failure.

A low probability of success shouldn't hold you back, as long as the temporary consequences of failure are recoverable. Be more mindful of the ultimate consequence of not taking that chance.

4. Know Your Risk-Management Capacity

When approaching a risky situation, some people — often those who have some special talents or experiences — go all-in and aim to grab the opportunity fast by taking bigger risks. Others take time to build a more solid foundation through each step so they have more control of the risk — at the cost of slower progress.

Which style should you choose? It depends on the situation, your skill, and your risk-management capacity. Consider the cost and return of taking those risks. Think about the alternatives you have and what the risk and return of those alternatives will be. Evaluate what losses you can afford, and consider what the temporary losses and permanent loss might mean. Ask yourself what your options are in the event of a soft loss, a hard loss, or a replaceable loss. Think about how you would recover from these possible losses. Keep in mind ways you could prepare yourself for the best outcome. You have to balance your skill level and risk-management ability.

5. Be a Smart Advice-Taker

It can be difficult to measure your own capability against the risk you're considering taking, because it's hard to view yourself objectively. But there's a mirror to help you see yourself better. That mirror is the feedback from people around you, such as mentors and colleagues.

Seeking advice is imperative before you take a risk. But if you get conflicting advice, how do you know which to heed? It's important to discern the intention behind each person's perspective.

Some, such as friends and family, might be over-protective of you because of emotional attachment; others may be driven by personal interest. Everyone has a bias. It's crucial to learn to recognize the value of different feedback. Don't listen just to what you want to hear. Don't brush aside opposing opinions too easily. Take it all in with an open mind, and then form your own judgment.

6. Thread the Line

It's a fine line between pushing too far and not pushing far enough, especially when the stakes are high. Not pushing enough causes mediocrity and may eventually lead to your

organization's demise. Pushing too far causes burnout and unsustainable growth.

Managing this delicate balance is a skill that can be learned, like courage and other risk-management skills. To avoid costly mistakes on either side of the line, practice taking chances. If you fail the first time, try again. Start with a small task, such as a new project, something you've never done. The more you try, the easier it will be to overcome fear. Gradually, you'll improve your ability to calculate risks and make sound judgments.

Fear of failure isn't a reason to avoid taking risks. Of course it's not smart to jump at every opportunity: You have to make the best decisions under the circumstances and constraints of your knowledge. Even a calculated risk can prove wrong sometimes, but when you take a chance you have the opportunity to learn and grow. If you're afraid of failure and never risk anything, you'll risk everything in the end. 

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