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## Interviewers just don't get the importance of failure

[Dave Murphy](#)

In the early 1960s, when Barbra Streisand was 19 and just getting her career going, she appeared at San Francisco's legendary hungry i with a young comedian. Streisand impressed the sparse audience on opening night, but two hecklers pretty much wiped out the comedian 10 minutes into his act.

"He was reduced to something pale, quivering and not quite human," the San Francisco Examiner wrote, "his back to the audience, elbows on the piano, mumbling material to the brick wall."

We all hit brick walls in our careers. Successful people find ways around them or over them or through them - even if it means dismantling those walls brick by brick.

One reason job interviews are such a waste of time is that people pretend the brick walls don't exist. Maybe a few employers will ask something like, "What is your biggest weakness?" or "Describe your greatest failure," but that just leads to a dance between the interviewer and applicant.

The applicant comes up with something so insincere that even his own mother wouldn't believe it, and usually the interviewer says "uh-huh" and moves on. I'm surprised they don't wink at each other.

Suppose a typical interviewer asks the comedian about his greatest failure, and the comedian describes in great detail his miserable night in San Francisco. Lots of interviewers would recoil in horror, figuring the applicant was a total loser, and move obliviously along on their superficial path.

They would never ask the most important question of the whole interview: "How did that make you stronger?"

The comedian probably has had even more spectacular failures than that opening night in San Francisco, but they have hardly turned him into a quivering mass. A neurotic one maybe, but not a quivering one. Woody Allen even did a little stand-up comedy at this year's Academy Awards, and got

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a standing ovation.

Just call this a hunch, but he probably became a lot more successful than his two hecklers did.

In his book "The Power of Failure: 27 Ways to Turn Life's Setbacks into Success," Charles C. Manz describes how NASA invited resumes from the public before its Apollo 11 mission. Even after weeding out candidates based on academic qualifications, the space agency still had several thousand applicants remaining.

"The next step was a very interesting one," Manz writes. "They weeded out all candidates who had not bounced back from a significant failure at some point in their careers.

"One might think it would be more logical to select those whose career performance was so strong that they had never experienced significant failure. They instead actually sought those who had failed. The apparent premise was that a person who had failed and then got up again was a stronger contender than one who had never experienced failure."

If you haven't had a significant failure, you're very young, very lucky or -

more than likely - very afraid to take a risk. Most comedians would have never gotten heckled mercilessly at the hungry i, simply because they wouldn't have been good enough to appear there in the first place.

Maybe they got heckled at a less significant place, or were simply too intimidated by the silence of a joke that bombed. They didn't face the hungry i hecklers not because they were too good, but because they were not good enough.

And just as learning from your failures can make you stronger, so can recognizing your weaknesses. But in job interviews, answers to "What is your biggest weakness?" tend to generate even more hot air than "Describe your greatest failure."

In "What Color Is Your Parachute?" Alamo resident Richard N. Bolles says employers are looking for some character flaw, and hoping you'll blurt it out in a moment of weakness. He suggests mentioning a weakness that also has positive aspects, such as, "I don't like to be oversupervised, because I have a great deal of initiative, and I like to anticipate problems before they even arise."

Martin Yate offers that strategy and a couple of others in his book, "Knock 'em Dead." His

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alternative strategies are mentioning some minor weakness that you obviously will be able to overcome, such as not knowing a particular computer program, or describing how you dealt with a past problem.

Sigh.

They're experts, and I don't disagree with their advice. It just points out how inane the whole interview process is. If you answered the question sincerely, a lot of interviewers would think you were a moron.

So you lie through your teeth. What a great way to build a future workplace relationship.

Think back to any U.S. president in your lifetime. What was his greatest weakness? I bet you could come up with something more significant than, "Gee, he didn't like to be oversupervised." Yet you, applying for a job that would place you 743rd in your prospective company's pecking order, have fewer flaws than the Hope Diamond.

As for me, I'm a lousy mingler who has trouble remembering names of acquaintances, takes workplace setbacks too seriously, bores easily, detests micromanagers, makes jokes when I shouldn't, hates long hours and doesn't exactly dress for success. Oh, and maybe I rely on sarcasm a teensy bit much.

I can't wait to tell an interviewer that. (Did I mention I was a sarcastic? I forgot.)

Regardless of what you tell an interviewer, though, know your weaknesses - and how you compensate for them. That doesn't necessarily mean dwelling on your deficiencies - often a better strategy is to focus on your strengths - but at least be aware of them. And have an honest answer in mind just in case you run into an interviewer who actually has a pulse.

If you're an interviewer and you get an "I don't like to be oversupervised" answer, follow one of two strategies: Press the applicant until you get a sincere answer, or vow to yourself that you will never ask the question again.

There is such a thing as a dumb question, if all you're getting is a dumb answer.

*E-mail Chronicle At Work Editor Dave Murphy at [dmurphy@sfgate.com](mailto:dmurphy@sfgate.com). You can find his past columns at [sfgate.com/columnists](http://sfgate.com/columnists).*

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