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# A CLUSTER-F\*\*\*AILURE!

**G**iven the ongoing train wrecks or meltdowns (take your pick) we're now experiencing in our racing lives, isn't it about time to try to figure out what the hell happened in the last six months? Why it did? What's still to come? And what to do about all this?

Twenty-five years or so ago this study made a lasting impression on me: "The Logic of Failure," by Dietrich Dörner, now emeritus professor at the Institute of Theoretical Psychology at the Otto-Friedrich University in Bamberg, Germany.

One reason is that the English translation I had was exceptionally difficult for me to understand; the most important is that after grappling with it through two complete readings, I felt I had learned some critical lessons.

Consider for a moment what your definition of "success" is. If you're a Major League hitter in baseball, you're very successful – that is, you get a hit, and win your competition with the pitcher – maybe three at-bats out of ten. You bat .300. Which means you failed to get a hit in seven of those at-bats. Far more than most hitters aren't even that successful. They fail to solve the problem the pitcher presented way more often.

In racing, if you're a trainer or an owner or a breeder, you know your success rate, counting by wins, is almost certainly worse than this. Which means you fail even more. Even if you have already solved innumerable problems just to get into the starting gate.

Shall we talk about betting the races? Solving those problems? Uh, no.

So, when you contemplate all the books and courses about "how to succeed . . .," at just about anything, it struck me that what we all should really be doing is what Professor Dörner did: study failure and mistake-making instead. So much so that, at the time, I thought I could make a fortune founding the Balch Institute for the Study of Failure. After all, I've had plenty of experience with it. We all have. Success or "winning" or true problem-solving really mean the avoidance of mistakes or errors. What we've been experiencing at Santa Anita, and threatened with everywhere else, is stark, colossal failure. Mistakes compounded by more and more.



Do we really understand failure? Why it happens? How to avoid it?

In part, Dörner used a case-study approach to analyze various disasters, and see what they had in common. Were he still active, I'd send our current experience in American racing his way to headline a new edition of his book. We in racing continue to check virtually all his boxes for serious mistakes and likely calamity.

One overwhelming reason for the critical situation in which racing finds itself is the complexity of our sport and industry. Virtually all of our stakeholders – and the media – have participated in elaborating the fundamental errors that have led us to a precipice. Whether or not we can even correct our course at this point is open to serious question.

We've all heard the maxim that assumption is the mother of all mistakes. It's true. Humans tend to oversimplify problems. Of all our many self-defeating behaviors, according to Dörner, one is key: we just don't like to see any particular problem as part of a whole system of interacting factors. So, when there's a problem in a particularly complex system (like a nuclear generator or Thoroughbred racing or training a horse) oversimplification and assumption are dastardly enemies of success. Of avoiding failure. Oversimplified assumptions cause serious mistakes to be made. Even deadly ones.

I still remember the late Edward DeBartolo, Sr., telling us that in all his many varied businesses and fields of enterprise, racing was far and away the most complex. So, when an important racing management assumes that what apparently "succeeds" in Florida (whether it actually does or not is a separate question) can be applied to California, with the same results, without seriously considering all its possible ramifications, that's just planting a quickly germinating seed of escalating failure.

Any true problem is likely much more complex than we humans would prefer, says Dörner. My old boss at Santa Anita, Robert Strub, whose father founded it, was incessantly criticized by just about all of us for being too deliberate, requiring too much study before any important decision. But that worked for Santa Anita through six decades. When he turned away from that deliberation just one time, he got the first Canterbury Downs in Minnesota, and almost took down his original Crown Jewel in the bargain. The outside "experts" on which he relied, rather than insiders, knew what they were doing, he said. Until they didn't. Then it was too late and bankruptcy beckoned.

So, always beware the "experts," whether inside or outside. Check their assumptions. Incessantly. Three-Mile Island nearly melted down, in important part, because an expert of great renown didn't need his calculations checked, because of that renown. Until he did, and then it was almost too late. Expert trainers and their expert veterinarians must likewise be checking their mutual assumptions incessantly.

Our human errors are so frequent because we resent slow thinking. We want to streamline processes to save time. In the name of "urgency." We try to repeat our past successes, even if the situations are importantly different.

The more complex the situation, the more facets are involved, the more dynamic and constantly changing it is. We humans don't easily grasp the exponentially multiplying ramifications of what might at first appear to be simple commands: "tighten up this track." "Run more often or your stalls are at risk." Intended to achieve a goal of growing field size, while ignoring the potential ramifications of the escalating and even more serious problems they created, among other factors these directives provided an ideal environment >

< for upheaval. Like my old horse trainer used to preach, “you never know what you can do until you try to undo what you just did.” Amen.

Is it any wonder that adding the exceptionally complex physiology of the horse and infinitely ingenuous human art of training them to such a complex, volatile mix, you actually have all the elements (or even more) of an operating nuclear reactor?

As Dörner states, “An individual’s reality model can be right or wrong, complete or incomplete. As a rule it will be both incomplete and wrong, and one would do well to keep that probability in mind.”

Indeed. The reality-model that track management applied to Santa Anita in January was both incomplete and wrong.

Then when things started to go awry, these same human frailties we all have as problem-solvers came into play, whether for managers, trainers, owners, regulators, veterinarians, reporters, critics, or politicians. Every human shortcoming was reflected in what each of us did in response, and magnified the original problem exponentially. We’re all mistake-prone humans.

At first, we fail to react, carefully or at all, especially if we as managers or administrators or trainers or regulators are afflicted with the “it’s not my problem” or “this isn’t really serious” syndrome. Those of us who saw our problems developing and didn’t do enough (or anything) to confront them, share mind-numbing responsibility for what happened later.

Those who stonewalled their very recognition have even more.

The next response following their recognition, however, can be equally or even more dangerous: emotional, subjective overreaction. Governments, regulators, managers, and media, all

then join a chaotic and ever-expanding whirlpool of feedback, failing to respect or even recognize their own lack of objectivity and knowledge. Managers speed decision-making even more, and point fingers, attempting to fix blame elsewhere. Honest media, in particular, while not intentionally destructive, tend to hide behind the “don’t kill the messenger” syndrome, having little or any regard for their own complicity in exaggeration and lack of context. They can’t control what others do, or fail to do, with the facts they report. Then there’s the observer effect: the mere observation of a phenomenon inevitably changes that phenomenon.

Journalists share the same human frailties with the rest of us, remember, although some don’t seem to recognize that. With ever-increasing competition among all media, for speed of reporting, for notice, readers, viewers, clicks, and social sharing, not to mention ego, recognition, reward, and profile . . . their selfish goals almost always overwhelm context, accuracy, sourcing, and detail. The world is more complex than ever before, and our sport the most complex of them all; yet the media are now correspondingly at their most superficial. Any and all public enterprises are at serious risk in such an environment, where broadcasting and sharing of the false or misleading or incomplete or exaggerated become virtually impossible to prioritize, modify, correct or place in proper context. The media, fired by critics and extremists, in turn inform (or misinform) governments; then, even experienced legislators and regulators panic in reaction, rather than pausing to learn, then to calm and educate their publics.

Let’s remember the complexity of our sport yet again – racing and horses are

far, far more difficult to understand and explain than they were even 50 years ago.

Which brings us to the issue of animal welfare vs. “rights,” an important distinction lost on most of the media and apparently on most regulators, legislators, and leaders as well. The public statistics relied upon by racing’s insatiable enemies, developed in the context of The Jockey Club’s own equine injury database and by governments, must be urgently and seriously corrected, improved, clarified, expanded, refined, and made capable of explanation by all of us. Our adversaries respect no rules, and care nothing about honesty, nuance, expertise, or horsemanship . . . racing’s leaders must become equally implacable and much better equipped than at present to educate the public, media, and governments about our efforts continually to improve horse welfare and simultaneously protect the hundreds of thousands of humans who depend on the sport and larger industry. Not to mention its overall economic impact. Those who oppose what they call “speciesism” – those who believe that humans and all “other” animals are equals, that discrimination in favor of one species, usually the human species, over another, is wrong – must be understood and isolated as the impractical extremists they are. Their influence within government and the media must be unrelentingly resisted and rejected if racing is to survive. Not to mention owning animals for pets and the raising of livestock, poultry, and fish for human consumption.

The very first priority, however, is to continue improving our own husbandry of horses, beginning with breeding a sounder horse, then managing and training them as the individuals they are, always recommitting ourselves to respecting and enhancing their welfare above all else. We must improve and magnify continuing, extensive, expert education of veterinarians, trainers, riders, and stable workers. Racing associations, horsemen’s organizations, and regulators must respect the declining size of the foal crop, adjusting calendars and conditions accordingly. Every protocol for track and turf maintenance must be re-examined; the possible improvement and re-introduction of the latest in synthetic tracks must be considered.

So, right now, every one of us in this almost infinitely complex and interdependent industry, and all the observers of it – whatever our role – need to pause, step back, and assess our own mistakes objectively, admit them, and learn from them. We all have made them. We have to learn how to avoid continuing and compounding them. ■

