

AMANDA LANG

## Why we need to teach our kids how to fail

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An American executive transplanted to run a multinational's Canadian operations will never forget the first time his son brought home an A from his new Canadian school. "It was an 82 per cent," he says wryly. "That's not an A, that's a B plus." Call it the "Canadian A" – not as in "eh" but as in "almost" and "also-ran."

At a time when Canada is riding high – given our stable fiscal position, our prudent regulatory systems, even our abundant natural resources – we're also at risk of failing miserably. Oh, we won't fail spectacularly – that's how the Americans would do it – but we'll fail in tiny increments, in quarter after quarter of lagging productivity, in month after month of non-investment by businesses in their own enterprise, in year after year of neglecting to diversify our trading base away from the U.S. to the bright world beckoning.

And so it was with particular dismay that I read The Globe and Mail's Saturday Folio – The Case for Killing the Competition – and learned that, under the guidance of Sport Canada, all 56 of our national sports bodies are co-ordinating efforts in a "long-term athlete development" program to promote fun over winning. Competition, we're told, isn't fun. Failing makes young people feel bad. It kills creativity. Why, just look at the Chileans and how creative they are on the soccer pitch: It must be because they've abandoned all notions that winning is important. You could laugh if it didn't make you want to cry.

For several decades government, academe and business have been poking and prodding at the mystery of poor Canadian productivity. A value of output – how many workers produce how much profit – productivity is the clearest measure of our collective wealth. If it's going up, we're getting richer. If it's going down – or even failing to keep pace with our largest trading partners – chances are we're getting poorer.

Nobody quite knows why we don't do more with the vast gifts at our disposal, and very few people like to talk openly about the chance that part of it might be cultural. We might actually be impressing it on our children. Why do I suspect that might be the case? Because when I suggest that possibility in a speech to a group of Canadian CEOs, three of them seek me out afterward to tell me I'm on to something. All three are American who run Canadian businesses.

The culture they find among their Canadian employees contains all the traits we hold dear: They're polite, they're collaborative, they emphasize the collective over the individual. But the flip side of those traits is what causes problems: They're fearful of offending, of making a mistake, and they resist sticking out their necks (meetings that could be accomplished with four people often involve 12).

So why does changing the rules of the games – calling them "festivals" rather than tournaments, neglecting to keep score in favour of fun for all – have the potential to do so much damage? Because what's important about children's athletic endeavours isn't just the push to win. It's about learning to lose. We may already be failing at failing: Learning to accept a loss gracefully and rallying to try again is arguably more important than taking home a trophy. I'm not saying I hope my kids lose every game, but I hope they learn how to lose some, and keep their heart in the fight.

John Ruffolo, CEO of OMERS Ventures (the arm of one of the country's biggest pension funds dedicated to investing in start-ups), says that, in Silicon Valley, having a failure or three under your belt is a badge of honour. You're more likely to get new capital if you have the experience that only failing can bring. In Canada, he says, failure is met with shame, and many first-time entrepreneurs never take a kick at the can again.

Making the *same* mistake over and over isn't acceptable, of course. But another way to look at failure is as a natural process of elimination that clears the path to success. By neglecting to teach our kids how to fail, we consign them to become another generation of Canadian executives, incapable of separating failure from fault, nodding in meetings when they should be speaking up. It's not really a gamble we can afford to make. Because while we might comfort ourselves that the kids are having more fun, we're handing them a legacy of wealth destruction, without the skills to change the story.

*Amanda Lang is the senior business correspondent for CBC News.*



Alex Chiet, the technical director for the Ontario Soccer Association says "parents may not understand how detrimental it is to overemphasize winning, so they think we're being too politically correct, that we're trying to water down the experience."

Chris Young//The Globe and Mail