

# Failure: the GREATEST TUTOR

Journalist, author and former table-tennis champion **Matthew Syed** spoke at the Cambridge Schools Conference in the UK about what he has learned from highly successful organisations and individuals. What is common to all of them, he said, is that they must first learn to fail

**W**hen it comes to understanding our own learning and that of our students, one of the greatest predictors of success is our attitude to failure. This is the premise of Matthew Syed, author, journalist, broadcaster and one-time British table-tennis number one. To illustrate this, he asks the delegates assembled at the Cambridge Schools Conference in Cambridge on a sunny September day who has heard of David Beckham – and then reframes his question to ask who has not heard of him, as smiles of recognition spread around the hall.

Matthew has spent a lot of time with the footballer, as he ghost-wrote his biography. He found that Beckham has a huge capacity to learn from failure. When he was sent off in a crucial match in the 1998 World Cup, the mistake changed him, but for the better, making him learn and analyse his attitude to the game. He has since called it one of his ‘top career moments’.

“Beckham was brilliant at learning from his mistakes. And learning from mistakes is resilience,” says Matthew.

Learning from failure is a key component of what Matthew calls a ‘growth mindset’. (This concept comes from Carol Dweck’s 2006 book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.) A person or organisation with a growth mindset is willing to try, fail, analyse and learn in order to get better at their chosen activity. This is opposed to a ‘fixed mindset’, where a person is



**Right** Matthew Syed. **Below** David Beckham: ‘Brilliant at learning from his mistakes’



more likely to believe that innate talent is the key to success.

However, to learn from failure and build up that resilience, you must first be prepared to test yourself. And what is practice, if not trying something over and over again to work out why you’re failing at it, and then putting it right? David Beckham certainly has a talent for football, but he didn’t start his life being able to shoot into the back of a net every single time. That came from a huge amount of good-quality practice.

“Diligent practice, that wonderful journey of practice, was what made Beckham a fantastic free-kicker. We learn by being stretched. Often when we’re stretched we make mistakes. That’s true in motor tasks, like football, but it’s also true in cognitive tasks. Does a failure or mistake mean we have really failed – or show that we are learning?”

For children, helping them to understand the importance of a growth mindset in their attitude to learning is crucial, Matthew believes. “Suppose I’m a



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child that thinks talent's important. I think also that I'm super-talented. Can you see the risk there psychologically? 'I don't have to work hard. I'm a genius! I'm going to get to the top anyway.' The child is more likely to stop putting in the hard work that is a prerequisite to becoming successful."

He continues: "Children who understand neural plasticity, and who are given pictures of brains changing over time, start to think in a growth mindset way. They think: 'That person is good at history, but to become as good as them, I have to grow some more muscle. I need to practise. They know that muscles grow and they start to see the brain that way.'"

Success, failure and practice, then, are all part of the same system, and schools that understand this will produce more resilient students able to learn from their mistakes. Matthew concludes: "We need to create a culture where teachers are constantly learning about how to improve their performance, so they are surrounding the students with the messages to enable them to learn, to be resilient and to achieve their potential." ■

#### Find out more...

Matthew's books, *Bounce* and *Black Box Thinking*, are published by John Murray Press. Buy them via [www.matthewsyed.co.uk](http://www.matthewsyed.co.uk)



**Below** Increasing brain power requires practice in the same way as building physical muscles



"Suppose I'm a child that thinks talent's important. I think also that I'm super-talented. Can you see the risk there psychologically?"

## Practice or perfect?

Try this exercise with your staff or students



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**1. Read out loud** the following digits to a group of people. Tell them not to write them down, but to remember them.

**8 1 3 7 0 9 2 4 6 1 0 5**

**2. Ask for volunteers** to recite the numbers, in the correct order, back to you. Do this three or four times.

**3. Tell them that** the average recall is five digits. Then ask them to tell you who has the greatest talent for memory among those who recited the numbers.

**4. Say to them:** "If I told you about a man who can remember 81 digits in this way, what would you say about him?" (Your likely answers are "He has a great memory," or "He has a talent for remembering numbers.")

**5. Tell them** the following story: a psychologist at Florida State University, Anders Ericsson, wanted to test the relationship between talent and practice. He took a normal man called Stephen, and did the above digit test with him. Stephen could recall four digits – slightly below average. Then Anders gave Stephen 100 hours of good quality practice in memory skills. How many random digits could this below-average untalented person recall after that? 81.

### The point?

"Ericsson said there seemed to be no limits to which ordinary people can improve their memory skill with practice," says Matthew. "You might think that Stephen is extraordinarily talented, but that isn't the case. When we witness high performance, we only observe a limited data set. We observe the performance and not what went into its construction: the practice."