

Why do we fail?

Sequel to How to Do Better in Exams

Vinod Kothari

My article titled How to Do Better in CA/CS Exams evoked what I regard as tremendous response. I am so happy that lots of students liked it, and in fact, many wrote mails packed with sentiments. Many of them came back with their personal problems. Overall, it was quite a happy experience having written this article. The kicker was that I have not written motivational stuff in the past: this one “motivated” me to write more motivational stuff, as many students wanted me to write further or answer their typical issues.

The responses can broadly be classed into 3:

- (a) There were loads of thank-you-sir mails. Some of them were highly emotion-packed, and I cannot resist the temptation of reproducing at least some of them. Of course, this is in addition to the “comments” appended to the respective sites.
- (b) There were some mails concerning CA or CS examinations. Perhaps these students would have thought I am someone from ICSI, or I have some administrative interference in the Institute. For example, some wanted me to say whether exemption can be claimed for a particular subject, or whether the student failed the exam should send his answer sheet for re-evaluation, etc. Since I am neither from the Institute, nor do I know much about exemptions, etc., I am unable to answer many of these queries. If I am able to answer those, or if I am able to get answers from the concerned staff of the Institute, I would surely come back.
- (c) The third type of mails are what prompts me to write this sequel. These are students who said, they are brilliant, they study for several hours each day, and still they have not been successful with their exams. This is not an uncommon problem, either in exams or in life. Exam is only one of the many races that we run in our life. Yes, I know many people who are absolutely brilliant, and yet they consistently fail, some in exams, and some in life. I intend to discuss this problem at some length in this article.

One click, and every thing changes:

Let me first express happiness and gratitude at the thank-you mails. As I said, I will reproduce at least some of them.

- I have just printed your article that you have posted on CA Club. After reading the article, I have got a positive flow of energy. From today itself I will study in this style and I am sure about my improvement because after reading this article only there is a flow of positive energy in me- shows that there is some power.
- I read you article; it is truly very good and I will definitely practice it. I am student of CA, my exams are in May and your article is really very helpful not only for exams but also in life. I liked the synopsis of you writing that mere

memorizing will not make me a good professional; understanding and learning will make us better professionals.

- I found this article very helpful, it is not just a formality in telling that it is a very useful article. What all difficulties I am facing have been expressed by you, so a special congratulation for reading the mind of me.
- Your article on how to do better in professional exams was just unbelievable and awesome, sir. You can't even think of my happiness after reading your article. Really is a must read article for student like me. I have cleared my PCC exams, but i don't have the knowledge that a CA-Finalist should have. Really sir you have opened my eyes as to how to read and understand and remember. The main thing is – read and learn to expand knowledge but not just to clear the exams. Hats off to you sir.
- I just came across to your article ‘ How to do better in CA/CS Exams..’ People know these things. But these things are well covered in basket. It needs to open the cover by someone like you. One click and the path changes

I must thank all these people, and many more, who have written similar thank-you mails or comments.

As one of the commentators rightly mentioned, what I said is nothing new. People know all of this. It is not that I was revealing hitherto undiscovered gems. However, it needs one inspiring sentence to trigger the fire within. In some cases, it may change the whole path of life. In some cases, it may keep you inspired for at least some time.

I am bright; I tried my best, and still failed:

However, as I said, my objective in writing this sequel was not to share the praise mails, but to try to tackle mails of students who say that they have tried their best, and still failed. There are at least a couple of these mails I want to reproduce:

- I have given two attempts of the CS Final Exam so far and was unfortunate to fail, by falling short of required aggregate. I was completely disheartened and depressed because I had studied almost for 15 hours a day. Sir, I had appeared for all three groups in both the attempts. Now, at this point of time I am confused whether to give all three groups again or not
- I am in big big trouble. I passed out 12th in 2006, 75%. That was the end I guess, as since then I haven't passed a single exam. I am really hesitating to write you much, as you would be a busy man.... Any ways I started with B.Com (H), flunked in 1st year, gave honours 1st year again, again flunked, then gave B.Com Pass 1st and 2nd year together, passed (but that was not because of me). I have caliber, and many teachers say that I am very intelligent. ..I am very good in class interaction ...most of the times teachers are very happy with my questions. I have given P.CC two times, flunked, getting marks like 8 , 10, 25, etc. Now I feel like going to a very secluded place and starting it all over again...

While both the problems are similar in nature – I am bright, I tried my best and I still failed, the first may have a shade of trying to do too much at one go. Let us deal with the

second question first. It is not uncommon for all of us to come across instances where one fails to explain a failure. Our friend obtains 75% marks in Class XII, and thereafter, he is a constant failure. Is it a plain case of chance?

If I were to generalize, failures are explained by 6 factors:

- I don't have an end
- I don't have means to the end
- I am not sincere towards the end
- I am not sincere towards the means
- I don't pursue or persevere
- Error factor

Every single failure, whether in exams or in life, may be explained by factor 1 to 5 above, and where none of the 5 factors apply, factor 6 is like the omnibus that covers all cases not covered by 1-5.

Lack of objective

Most failures are caused by lack of end, lack of objective. People don't know what they want. Like the famous line from Alice in Wonderland that says – if you don't know where you are going, then any road will take you there, those who don't know what they want are never able to get what they want. Most people who fail are unclear about their objective, or their objective in hand, and fail to put priorities in proper sequence. For instance, we have a short term objective, and a long term objective. What is more important? Many would favour long term. They would say, today's pain is tolerable, if tomorrow is a gain. Ultimately, it is long term that matters; hence, short term objectives should give way to long term. On the other hand, in the fast pace of life of our present day, many are not even concerned about the long term. Today gain, even if tomorrow is a pain, seems to be the motive.

In fact, choosing between long-term and short-term is not a case of either/or options. We cannot disregard short-term while caring for the long-term objectives. Of what avail is tomorrow's gain, if today, day after day, continues to be a pain? In fact, what we need is to balance out between short term and long term objectives, and if at all there is a conflict, short-term needs may have to override long-term concerns.

For instance, in my original article, I preached about studying for knowledge and not for the exams. Here too, one may say, knowledge is the long-term objective, exam is the short-term objective. There is no conflict between the two, as if you are studying for knowledge, that would take care of your exams too. But imagine something like this – for whatever reason I have not studied round the year, and I woke up a month before the exams. With only a month left, if I take Vinod Kothari suggestion, and start studying for knowledge, I am sure to be a failure. Because, here there is a conflict between short-term and long-term objective. With the amount of time left, my studies cannot be intensive – they have to be extensive. So even if I cannot see the full picture of the subject clearly, I need to see patches, so as to get a foothold in the exams. Hence, in choosing between

knowledge-orientation and exam-orientation, you need to make a rational and balanced choice.

Our friend who scored distinction in Class XII but started flunking consistently thereafter probably suffers from some lack of priority, some misdirection. It may be a case of distractions eating up a lot of his time, or wrong prioritization. To take an example, I have quite often seen students putting hours and hours of effort in betterment of a certain subject (A) where marks range between 50% to 65%, at the cost of a subject (B) where marks range between 50% to 80%. As you have limited time before your exams, you need to ration out your time. Most intuitive principle of rationing demands that you allocate resources where utilities are the maximum, or the cost-benefit ratio is the maximum. 10 hours of time put into subject A may better your marks from 50 to 55, but those very 10 hours in subject B may uplift you from 50 to 70.

Allocation of time is an example of proper prioritization, which, by itself, has many dimensions. Our friend with a bit of reflection may himself find out if his brilliance, energy, is getting lost somewhere.

Lack of means:

The second factor is quite obvious and does not need much elaboration. I know where I want to go, but I don't have the transportation to take me there, obviously I will never be able to reach. Every task needs proper resources: if we don't have bullocks to till the farm, we can't do it with mere objective or determination.

The first querist above who said she spent 15 hours to study every day, took all 3 groups twice, and failed, may be taking too much of a bite for her mouth. I am obviously not sure, but that may be the reason. 15 hours a day is probably the upper limit of how much one can study: she could not have studied more. I don't think any student studies for longer hours. If there was no other reason, I would have suggested taking fewer groups together. Incidentally, I must make another important point. She should not drop out the third group – she should prepare for two, but anyway appear in the exam for the third one also. You never know you may be lucky. Even if you don't get through the group that you did not prepare, at least you took a practice examination. In fact, I have suggested this to many students, and guess what, quite often people have passed out though they never prepared for the group that they were not serious with. (I can also write a secret article on the art of constructive bluffing!)

Error factor

Factor 3 and 4, respectively, are extensions of factor 1 and 2 respectively. Hence, I would not elaborate on these. Factor 5 is lack of perseverance, hard work, etc. This is again so well known, so well stress, that it would be superfluous, at least in this article, to write on factor 5.

Hence, I spend some space on Factor 6. People call it by different names. Most people call it the "luck factor". As I am a non-believer in luck, I just call it the error factor. In general, efforts lead to results or success. Unless factor 1 to 5 apply, every effort must,

therefore, lead to success and there should not be any case of failure at all. However, in human behavior, there is no mathematical equation that equates effort with success. On the contrary, effort and results are a mathematical “inequality”. Since E for Effort \neq S for success, we put an error factor (e) to complete the equation. That is,

$$E = S + e, \text{ where } e \text{ may be any positive or negative number}$$

That is to say, S is a function of E, but then sometimes, S is more than E, and sometimes it is less. This is just a case of inequality, a random error term. Like all mathematical error terms, the error may be either positive, or negative, and it is purely random. People bring in “luck” or “stars” to explain the error, but in my view, no one can either consistently be lucky, or consistently unlucky. The only question is, did we get into despair because last time, our success was not consistent with the effort? Quite often we do - hence, that despair detaches us from the objective (factor 3 or 4 comes in), and therefore, we repeat our failure.

In sum I would say, proper prioritization is required everywhere in life, and particularly so for students who have defined time limits for achieving things.