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# Learning to manage as learning to fail: The lessons of running

Management Learning

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## Abstract

Management learning aims to ensure managerial success and while failure is acknowledged, learners are encouraged to adopt a growth mindset and to bounce back from failure. However, the complexity of contemporary managerial work and the degradation of the managerial labour process mean that managers increasingly experience failures. Managers therefore need to learn not merely from failure but to learn to tolerate failure, that is, to fail well. The article differentiates types of failures and focuses on intractable failures that leave managers feeling inadequate and that corrode their sense-of-self. Therefore, an affective and embodied identity-based understanding of managerial failure is developed and an empirical case study of managers who engage in the most popular managerial sporting activity, running, is used to theorise the process of learning to fail-well. The mixed-methods empirical study using artefact elicitation participant data and autoethnographic authorial data is detailed and suggestions for more reflexive managerial education are advanced.

## Keywords

Fitness, identity, manager failure, running, vulnerability, reflexivity

## Introduction: *Management as an experience of failure*

Highly successful managers, leaders and entrepreneurs often attribute their success to failures along the way. For instance, arguably the world's most successful manager, Jeff Bezos, claims 'my life is based on . . . a cascade of failures' (cited in Stone, 2021). The implication here, and the unquestioned narrative arc of management education aimed at less senior managers, is that learning from failure results in eventual success (Bledow et al., 2017). It is typically emphasised that this learning from failure should involve learning from the failures of others (Syed, 2015), and this approach is institutionalised at the meso-level in, for instance, incident reporting and investigation

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in healthcare and in aviation (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005). At the micro-level of individual manager learning, the pedagogy of reflective practice on executive education programmes is an expression of the same principle: failure is an invaluable source of learning and improved practice (Denrell, 2003).

Managerial failure is, though, under-reported (Corlett et al., 2021) and a widespread reluctance to engage with failure is observed (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005; Newton et al., 2008; Syed, 2015). However, most managers experience more failures than successes across their careers (Deslandes, 2020). While entrepreneur-managers such as Bezos might prevail over failure, many managers are set-up for failure through the increasing control over their managerial labour process associated with inflating performance expectations and auditing against key performance indicators (KPIs) (Graeber, 2019; Lucio and MacKenzie, 2022). Similarly, grand challenges such as climate change suggest that managerial encounters with failure will be ever more likely. In response, the intention of this article is not to further understanding of failure *per se*, but rather, to further theoretical understandings of how managers learn to cope with failure, that is, of how managers learn to live with failure, how they learn to ‘fail well’.

While the focus of the article is therefore on failing well, an outline definition of failure itself is nonetheless necessary. Management failure has been extensively researched at the organisational level (e.g. Bledow et al., 2017). Failure at the individual level, which is the focus of this article, has also been widely examined and types and taxonomies of individual failures have been discerned (e.g. Syed, 2015). There is some consensus that failure can be defined as an inability to meet standards or expectations set by oneself or by others or as a deviation from expected or desired results (Cannon and Edmondson, 2005; Newton et al., 2008). Further definitional work has focussed on the causes of failure. Failure that is attributable to personal shortcomings is distinguished from failure that is attributable to socio-structural or systemic factors (e.g. McCartney and Campbell, 2006). The former failures might typically be singular and simple failures and these need to be distinguished from the latter which are more likely to be intractable failures. Singular failures might also be understood as mistakes, where something goes awry and where intentions are not realised but where a solution is likely to be known or knowable. Such failures are resolvable or avoidable in the future. The focus of managerial education in relation to failure has been limited to considering these singular failures and enabling managers to learn *from* failure. For instance, Dweck’s (2017 [2006]) work has been influential in managerial education, and this work contrasts a ‘not competent’, fixed mindset with a ‘not yet competent’, growth mindset. Through the supposedly simple process of honestly acknowledging failure and adopting a growth mindset, failure leads to new and better ways of behaving. By contrast, an intractable failure is a more enduring, impactful occurrence or series of occurrences. Many failures experienced by managers are of this latter type, being intractable (Bledow et al., 2017), certainly by individuals, and failure really is failure. Such failures leave a feeling of inadequacy and require ‘living with’ rather than ‘learning from’ (De Botton, 2019).

While recent manager learning research has raised awareness of managers’ ‘vulnerability’ (Corlett et al., 2019) and of the ‘unknowingness’ of management (Hay, 2022), a distinct gap in the literature lies in understanding how managers can learn to live with intractable failure, that is, to fail-well (Rostron, 2022a). This article therefore contributes by furthering understanding the process of failing-well. Failures typically pose a threat to the sense-of-self (Syed, 2015). Therefore, an identity perspective on failure is developed and empirical data are analysed through this lens to systematically theorise the process of failing-well.

The empirical data used here to theorise the process of failing-well were initially generated for an investigation into why many managers are runners. It is estimated that over half of all managers frequently participate in fitness activities and the higher status forms of running, such as

long-distance and cross-country, are the most common of these activities (Baxter, 2021; Johansson et al., 2017; Maguire, 2008; Maravelias, 2015). While a range of reasons have been advanced to explain the popularity of running among managers (see Warhurst and Black, 2022), recent recognition of the embodied facets of managerial knowing and learning (Gherardi, 2017; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2022; Satama et al., 2022; Steyaert, 2022) suggested that running would be fruitful for understanding managers' learning about failure. Hence, the research questions informing this article are: how do experiences of intractable failure influence managerial identities; how does running alleviate experiences of intractable failure and how can an identity interpretation of running advance the theorisation of learning to fail-well? The article now proceeds to critically examine the literature of identity, identity threat and identity-work and to thereby build the theoretical foundations for understanding the process of failing-well. The empirical enquiry is then detailed. Findings are then analysed to develop a theoretical understanding of failing-well, and conclusions are drawn to theorise learning to fail-well. Finally, implications for managerial education programmes are developed.

### **Review: Understanding failure through understanding identity**

Experiences of intractable failures engender a sense of inadequacy and thereby undermine the sense-of-self. However, the established understanding of experiences of failure in terms of the presence or absence of a growth mindset and of learning *from* failure (e.g. Dweck, 2017 [2006]) does little to account for such existential consequences. By contrast, an identity perspective furthers understanding of failure and of how managers might learn to tolerate failure, *to* fail-well. This perspective aligns with the increasing awareness that managerial learning is not merely a process of acquiring knowledge and developing understanding but is also, and perhaps mainly, a process of becoming a particular type of person (Beyes and Steyaert, 2021; Clarke and Knights, 2020). Therefore, management cannot be understood without understanding identity (Brown, 2019). However, the identity field is formidable, identity is a slippery concept and a diversity of distinct approaches grounded in contrasting philosophical traditions can be discerned (Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018).

A social-constructionist approach is adopted here, whereby identities are understood as being formed through discourse, positionality, appearance and affect (Kuhn, 2006). Typically, discourse is the dominant identity resource and identities are constructed through the selective deployment of discourse and the weaving of narrative. Therefore, 'the self is being formed in what is told' (Gabriel et al., 2010: 1706). However, identities are not individual accomplishments but involve an interplay between self-identification and identification by others. In other words, identities exist at an intersection between who an individual is for themselves and who they are for others (Ybema, 2020). Identities are therefore dialogical, being created and sustained or challenged and denied in real or imagined interactions with others.

Organisational role-based interactions tend to determine and thereby restrict the identity positions available to individuals through identity defining norms and discourses (Beech et al., 2021; Beyes and Steyaert, 2021; Bolander et al., 2019; Clarke and Knights, 2020). Thus, hegemonic organisational discourses such as 'efficiency', 'performance' and 'deliverables' can readily colonise and determine managers' subjectivities (Kuhn, 2006; Walker and Caprar, 2020). Where an occupational role becomes a significant part of an individual's identity, as is often the case with managers (Hay, 2014), so the scope for agentic self-identification is constrained and identities are potentially regulated (Brown, 2020; Knights and Clarke, 2014). Moreover, as the occupational labour process of management is increasingly controlled through performance measures (Graeber,

2019; Sennett, 1998), occupational selves become more regulated and precarious (Coupland and Spedale, 2020; Deslandes, 2020).

However, through identity-work, which involves consciously understanding who one wants to be and constructing the self accordingly, individuals have the potential to construct alternative, valued and secure identities (Brown, 2017; Caza et al., 2018; Driver, 2017). Identity-work is necessary on a continuing basis and is intensified when an individual's preferred sense-of-self is threatened or damaged by, for example, perceived occupational failures (Gabriel et al., 2010; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2020). Various types of identity-work are discerned (Corlett et al., 2017). Aspirational identity-work is likely involved in initially achieving managerial positions, whereas reinforcing and restorative identity-work are needed to maintain a managerial sense-of-self in the face of workplace challenges (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Ultimately, though, reinventive identity-work might be invoked as managers encounter intractable failures.

Reinventive identity-work involves first, disidentification from work as a source-of-self and second, the search for identities beyond work (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016). An absorbing lifestyle activity such as running could provide the basis for an identity beyond the work domain particularly as recent research demonstrates the importance of embodiment in managerial identities (Gherardi, 2017; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2022; Satama et al., 2022). By contrast to the emasculated cognitively defined selves deriving from enervating managerial work, individuals can reinvent themselves through embodiment in corporeal terms (Courpasson and Monties, 2017; Maravelias, 2009; Scott et al., 2017). Within the embodied domain success or failure can be redefined in personal terms (Abbas, 2004; Johansson et al., 2017). Reinvention through running might thus enable the emergence of an alternative, more positive sense-of-self (Ronkainen et al., 2018: 133). However, being a runner could be an appealing aspect of identity to managers regardless of the extent to which failure is experienced (Baxter, 2021; Costas et al., 2016). If not displacing an occupationally derived identity, running might at least provide an additional identity dimension. Moreover, as the elite forms of running are associated with mental toughness (Baxter, 2021), so running builds resilience. McGannon et al. (2017) thus noted that through their discussions of injuries, runners constructed stronger and empowered subject positions.

As suggested earlier, within their organisational communities, managers' identities are likely to be constrained as managerial roles largely determine who they can be (Brown, 2020; Clarke and Knights, 2020; Ybema, 2020). By contrast, membership of communities beyond the workplace provide liminal identity-work spaces for the realisation of alternative and preferred identity positions (Beech et al., 2021; Callagher et al., 2021; Dawson, 2017; Mowles, 2017; Rostron, 2022b; Warhurst, 2011). While running is an individual sport, runners typically belonging to such communities in the form of running clubs and Jones (2022) showed how such a sports club, in this case a swimming club, was a restorative space for professionals. This club supported the swimmers to reinvent themselves beyond their work while also enabling them to re-engage with their work on more personal and satisfying terms. Social identity theorising highlights how such existential reinvention is achieved. Individuals define themselves in alignment with established members of favoured 'in-groups' and in opposition to members of disfavoured 'out-groups' (see Ybema, 2020).

However, it must be acknowledged that running could reinforce existential precarity, making failing-well less likely. Traditional Marxist analyses of the body (e.g. Brohm, 1978) show how bodily expression of selves through, for example, the lean physique acquired from running, can become a neo-normative means of control and repression. Leanness aligns with the logic of neo-liberal capital being a physical expression of competitiveness and performance. Therefore, by running, managers might become duped into self-exploitation incurring identity damage (Pronger, 2017). Moreover, as ageing and sporting injuries engender more failures than successes, so prized

athletic identities also become vulnerable (Coupland, 2015). In Foucaultian terms, running could thus become a technology of the self, that is, an identity-regulating practice (Baxter, 2021).

Whether managers' attempts to cope with the insecurities and identity threats associated with intractable failures result in further identity-regulation or in successful reinvention, might hinge upon their capacity for reflexivity. Reflexivity requires critically questioning assumptions, emotions, habitual ways of thinking and behaving to uncover the 'why' behind the 'what' of life (Sambrook, 2015). Through reflexivity, identity regulating forces can be discerned and challenged as a basis for authentic self-transformation (Collien, 2018; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017; Vu and Burton, 2020).

In conclusion, managers' experiences of intractable failures can be understood in terms of identity and such theorising has the potential for understanding how managers might learn a healthier engagement with failure, that is to fail-well. However, these insights from identity theory have yet to be examined empirically or synthesised into a theoretical account. Therefore, the article proceeds to detail the empirical work that generated data of managers' experiences of failure and running and will proceed to develop of an identity based theoretical understanding of failing-well.

### **Methodology: Researching embodiment**

The focus on managers' experiences of failure was induced from a broad research project with managers that aimed to examine, 'what does running mean for you?' This focus was facilitated as the research strategy had been qualitative and was grounded upon a social-constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. The research privileged interpretive depth over breadth (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016), and therefore, a purposive and snowball approach to sampling was adopted. Invitations to participate were circulated on social media targeting members of the local running community. Eleven male and eight female running-managers were recruited. The running literature typically discerns a hierarchy of runners ranging from athletes, through runners to joggers (e.g. Baxter, 2021; Collinson and Hockey, 2007). Most participants were 'runners' meaning that they typically ran several times a week and competed regularly in various forms of races. In terms of their management roles, most participants were junior or middle managers, typically managing a small team and had an average of 5 years managerial experience. Participants came from diverse organisations including large public-sector organisations such as healthcare and educational institutions, large private-sector firms such as management services companies, and a range of small and medium-sized enterprises. Therefore, the sample embraced a breadth of experiences. Data analysis for this article revealed that a point of theoretical saturation was reached, whereby no new concepts were emerging and so no additional participants were sought.

Whereas wholly discursive methods such as the traditional research interview are of limited effectiveness for researching affect and embodiment, (Beyes and Steyaert, 2021), visual methods enable explorations of corporeality (Pink, 2015; Thanem and Knights, 2019; Warren, 2002). Therefore, an artefact-elicitation method was used in this enquiry, whereby participants were asked to bring images or artefacts to interviews in response to the question 'why do you run?' Participants were then simply invited to discuss their images and artefacts and prompted to explore the meaning of running in relation to their managerial work. As others have found (e.g. Mills and Hoerber, 2013), this approach conferred several key benefits. First, the method effectively enabled the direct, rather than merely reported, expression of affective and embodied experiences through the visual depiction of running in action. Second, whereas experiences of failure are usually hidden and difficult to articulate linguistically (Bledow et al., 2017), the method helped participants express such feelings (Busanich et al., 2016; Warren, 2002). For example, a finish-line image depicting a participant's obvious distress at finishing a race in what she regarded as a poor time.

Third, image-based methods enhance rapport with participants, thereby improving engagement and reflection (e.g. Mills and Hoeber, 2013). The interviews lasted an average of 70 minutes and were recorded and independently transcribed. A dataset of c. 170,000 words resulted, and 65 participant-supplied images and researcher photos of participants' artefacts were collected.

Autoethnographic data were also used as we ourselves were fellow travellers (Tulle, 2007) being both runners and (academic) managers. Autoethnography is useful in studying facets of lives that are less accessible to outside researchers such as identities (Alvesson, 2009) and, specifically in this case, experiences of failure. We had exchanged social-media messages over several years about our running and a *reflexive* and theoretical analysis of these messages afforded longitudinal data that complemented the single-point, *reflective* participant data.

Participants' artefacts and images directly evidenced sensory and embodied experiences, and these were themselves analysed. However, the participants' accounts prompted by their artefacts and images were the main data source analysed. The first stage of analysis involved inductive coding of the transcripts and images with the researchers open to whatever emerged from the data. Broad descriptive codes were devised, and these codes were subsequently refined and agreed between the two researchers before being applied to the corpus of data. The second analytical stage brought the researchers' theoretical awareness into play and the descriptive codes were translated into theoretical codes. For example, an inductive, descriptive code of 'eroded status' was applied to a participant's story of how his managerial authority had been restricted over time and how he had recently been undermined in front of his staff by a superior. This was subsequently theoretically coded as 'threatened identity'. The artefacts and images were similarly analysed thematically, first, descriptively, in terms of content and second, theoretically (Black and Warhurst, 2015). So, in the case of the example provided earlier describing an image provided by a participant, the image was analysed theoretically as 'resilience'. Finally, informed by the principles of narrative analysis (Alvesson, 2009), accounts were appraised for evidence of reflexivity (Collien, 2018). Reflexivity was evidenced by comments on, for example, the context and underlying motives for running. Thus, Amal reflected, 'I suppose I'm motivated to run as it is the one thing in my life that I have some degree of control over'.

Research standards were assured as follows. First, the ethical challenges of visual methods were addressed in gaining institutional ethical approval. Second, the method enabled participants to constructively reflect on their work and lives, and therefore, the ethical concerns arising from traditional extractive approaches to data collection were negated. Third, the co-researchers reflectively challenged and refined each other's coding. Fourth, negative cases were actively sought, and we were alert to the emergence of new themes (Corlett et al., 2019). Finally, the broader relevance of the enquiry was established through relating the findings to established theorising (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016). These findings are now presented and interpreted theoretically.

### **Findings: Running, failure and failing-well**

Participants typically reported that running provided an escape from the pressures and failures that characterised their managerial work. This evidence of running as a short-term escape aligns with established research and is initially examined in what follows. However, analysis of the data in the light of the identity concepts discussed earlier provides insights beyond this usual narrative, and enables the theorisation of how running provided longer-term benefits in enabling managers to learn to fail-well. First, through running, participants were able reinvent themselves by forming embodied identities that supplemented or displaced the enervating and largely cognitive identities derived from their work. Second, running was typically experienced socially thereby enabling

participants to redefine themselves in relation to an alternative and purposefully chosen community within which experiences of failure were shared and normalised. Third, through increasing exposure to failure, running prompted a degree of reflexivity which served to neutralise the negative emotions associated with failure. Running managers thus became more accepting of the inevitability of failure and were enabled to construct a resilient sense-of-self. Finally, while for most participants, running worked in these ways, building failure tolerant identities, that is, the ability to fail-well, for a few participants, running compounded managerial identities defined by performance, thereby exacerbating their vulnerability to failure. The failure of this minority to fail-well from running will be explained in terms of their having yet to develop the reflexivity that running typically cultivated.

## Escape

Although the research did not directly question participants regarding their managerial work, all participants spoke at length of their work and there was evidence within all the accounts of frustrations at work and many participants spoke of their managerial failures. Hilal, a senior orthopaedic surgeon who managed a clinical team, reflected,

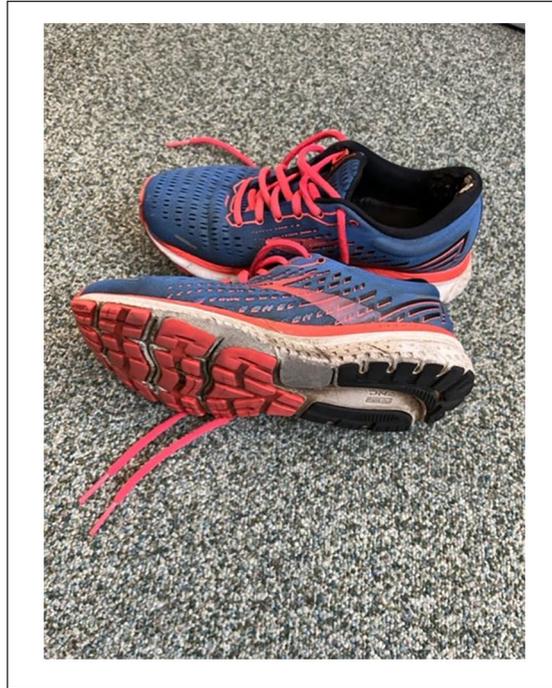
It's difficult with this work to have objective measures of success and often the only feedback that your team get is negative. Say we do an operation, and someone has post-operative pain, that's the feedback you get. It's quite rare that you hear: 'I was really pleased with that procedure; everything went perfectly'. That is almost taken for granted. This has become increasingly a problem with medicine in general as the expectations have become so high for the patient to have a normal life if only they are given more and more treatment. But there are some things that can't be treated, and you get that with orthopaedics a lot, such as end-stage arthritis where patients are too unwell to have an operation and there's nothing we can do and people just almost won't accept this, that's the truth.

Hilal's sense of ever-increasing expectations was typical and contributed to participants' sense that success was elusive and failure was pervasive in their work. In a very different type of work, Chris, a catering manager, noted similar feelings reflecting the increasingly performative regime characterising contemporary knowledge-work (Jones, 2022) and that were regulating and threatening managerial identities:

In this business our performance is constantly measured by KPIs. I came here from managing an operation where I had been hitting all of my KPI's, but it is quite difficult here because the KPIs have been set by our senior people without taking into account that this is a new client and these KPIs are not really achievable here so it's kind of a situation at the minute where we are not hitting them at all. This is not a comfortable space to be in but I fear it is how life is now.

All participants spoke of the intersection of their running with their work roles, stating how running was acting, as established research shows, as an escape from the pressures of work and was enhancing their ability to cope at work. Eve, who had recently been promoted to her first managerial role, managing a large hospital pharmacy reflected,

Running just relaxes me; so, I think instead of just getting tenser and tenser with regards to work stresses or anything along those lines, if I go out for a run it does just calm me down and I can just approach things at work from afresh the next day. I don't actually know what I would be like without it now.



**Image 1.** Running shoes.

While running undoubtedly provided such short-term benefits for managers, through the application of an identity lens, running can be understood as providing longer-term benefits by enabling managers to learn to cope with failure, to fail-well.

## Reinvention

Experiences of managerial failures were unsettling and creating a sense of existential precarity: as Eve noted, ‘it’s not a comfortable space’. However, for many participants, running enabled reinventive identity-work, supplementing or displacing work as their main or valued identity. Pete, a school leader, showed the researchers a pair of worn-down running shoes:

The worn state of the illustrated shoes (Image 1) shows that Pete was no newcomer to running. The shoes prompted the comment:

I run because of who I am. I don’t do running because of my job . . . I have always had running shoes and I think running shoes for me show me the simplicity of running. I think teaching and now managing a school, are like acting because you open the doors in the morning and you put a different face on, for the students and for the staff. But with running, you get a pair of running shoes and just go and you are a runner, nothing else.

Running for Pete and others was providing an authentic (not an ‘acting’) identity. This identity was an alternative and more valued identity to the standardised managerial subjectivities that were imposed upon them through their work roles.

Identifying as runners reflected managers' striving to displace identities defined largely in a cognitive domain and blemished by the failures associated with managerial work. Running provided an aspirational identity realised in a visceral domain (Beyes and Steyaert, 2021). Proudly showing the researchers an 'ultra' finishers' T-shirt, a systems-support manager, Megan expressed the intense but conflicting emotions engendered by running:

I was just so sore, I never thought that I'd get to the end of that kind of thing. It was absolutely horrendous. I was in tears. Anyway, the next day I signed up for Yorkshire [another ultra]. I think, though, something happens after you have finished a race. There must be some sort of endorphins or whatever that are coursing around you because you just feel buzzing. The evening after a race, you have got so much adrenaline going through you, you are on a real high and anticipating this 'after-effect' is what keeps you going through the agony. Incidentally, Yorkshire was last month, and it was no better. I remember the pain so vividly: I can't hide from it.

Through such corporeality, managers acquired agency to escape the enervating and emasculating consequences for identities derived from managerial work. Running thereby enabled managers to become who they wanted to be.

## Connection

Virtually all participants were members of running groups and, as seen in earlier, community membership both supports the identity-work required for reinventing the self and provides a social category as a source of identity (Beech et al., 2021; Callagher et al., 2021; Mowles, 2017; Rostron, 2022b; Watson, 2020). Whereas managing was typically experienced as isolating, running was an opportunity for connection. Running communities beyond the workplace provided spaces and resources for participants' identity experimentation and for reinventing and sustaining identities untainted by the corrosive experiences of being managers. Charlie was typical in reflecting on her *parkrun* community:

What I like about it is that it feels like a fraternity and gives a nice sense of belonging that I certainly don't get at work. As you can see in this picture taken at a group run [presents social-media image], it looks like a family photo. We are even all wearing our parkrun shirts. Certainly, it's a supportive community that gets me out of bed whatever the weather and even if I don't run well and get a PB, I know I am beating all those people who just stay in bed on a Saturday morning.

Charlie's comments show how identity was derived from membership of one group, a running community, and from non-membership of another group, the lazy. Distinctive language ('PB' for personal best) and distinguishing clothing such as Charlie and her friends' *parkrun* T-shirts, acted as membership signifiers. Similarly, Colin presented the following image (Image 2) taken by a fourth member of his running group at the end of a particularly muddy run.

Colin noted how the shared adversity of this winter run on muddy tracks enabled his friends and himself to develop a sense-of-themselves as being distinctive and different from others. Both the image and the associated account reveal how Colin valued seeing himself as tough and outdoorsy by contrast to his workaday soft and clean managerial self. Reflecting further on this image, Colin commented, 'we call ourselves 'the plodders'; none of us win much, if anything, but we are all tryers and I guess the same could be said for most runners'. By contrast to failures experienced as managers, failures experienced as runners were thus both shared and normalised. Colin's comment reflected a reality evident in most accounts, that running, as with any competitive sport, involves more failure than success. However, through the community of runners, failure was valorised, and vulnerability weakened.



**Image 2.** Muddy legs.

## Resilience

The increased exposure to failure associated with running built affective resilience which served to boost existential security. By contrast to managerial work, running failures arose from agentic choice and exposure to failure could, ultimately, be controlled. As seen, running increases individuals' exposure to failure and virtually all accounts were peppered with emotional stories of failures to achieve running goals. For instance, Bill, who worked as a project manager with a utility company, showed his high-grade knee and ankle supports remarking:

Running can really wreck you. I was running London [marathon] and I pulled my Achilles on mile four and I literally collapsed to the ground. I was really determined to complete this though as it is such an iconic one. So, I got myself up and I hobbled on. I was devastated though with my time – nearly five hours. Gutting. Anyway, I've [now] been focussing on triathlon.

Bill's account is therefore one of pain and failure, but also of determination and recovery: while Bill might have been unable to run a marathon again for a while, he could run the shorter, triathlon, distance. Bill was typical in demonstrating capability to live with failure, to accept and tolerate failure and to thereby prevail in the face of failure. Co-author, K, an academic-manager, had a similar experience of injury to Bill and was equally determined to struggle on with running.

In our social-media exchanges K had noted how she was struggling to return to full fitness after injury and she sent the image (Image 3) of visceral discomfort which reinforced her point. K reflected that her encounters with failure in work were now matched by her encounters with failure in running. In one exchange, K concluded 'this is so depressing: I was over two minutes slower than at last year's event: two minutes'.

However, over time, K, like participant Angi, learnt to cope. Angi showed the researchers an electronic invoice from a physiotherapist who had been helping her recover and prepare for her next marathon. Angi noted that the physio had said to her:



**Image 3.** Pained runner.

What is more important to you, running fast or being able to run at all?' When I looked at it like that, I could only answer, 'being able to run'. There is no point trying to run fast so that every now and again you get seriously injured, you may as well just plod along and then get the reward from running, from being a runner and being someone who tries and succeeds on their own terms. So, I have come up with this idea of the PFPB [post fifty personal best]. That's perfect isn't it? There's no absolute achievement for me anymore only relative achievement. And that's where I am now and I am happy with that.

Clearly, there was no escape from failure for runners and the inevitability of failure had to be confronted and accepted through adjusting expectations. Failure in the running realm was ultimately, though, failure on the manager's own terms. Therefore, running was neutralising the negative affect associated with failures, building existential resilience, and thereby cultivating tolerance of failure.

### **Failing or failing-well?**

It is clear from the above findings, that running enabled most participants to learn to fail-well. However, for a small number of participants, running was reinforcing their performative orientation and thereby accentuating a sense of failing without the benefits of learning to fail-well. As

discussed earlier, occupational roles restrict the identity positions available to individuals (Beech et al., 2021) and running could reinforce the performance orientation required in managerial roles thereby deepen vulnerability (Cederström, 2011; Maguire, 2008; Maravelias, 2015). Sabine, a partner in a management-consultancy firm, presented a photo taken of her entering the final mile of an endurance race and her commentary on this contains sentiments that are characteristic of several participants' experiences:

This was just before the end [the picture shows a pained expression] . . . as soon as I can see a finish line I can just sprint, and I've consistently always been able to do it and I was chasing this guy who was quite a way ahead of me when we were coming down at the start of the hill and I just started taking off. I knew that I had it in me to just absolutely destroy myself to the line. One of the nice things about these events is when you can overtake fast people by just unloading everything you have left. I guess I get a rush out of completely emptying the tank.

Participants such as Sabine were particularly avid users of Strava, the on-line system for tracking runs and comparing performance, and sports-watches or performance apps on phones featured in the interviews.

Therefore, running might have regulated identities in the same way as managerial work and, in turn, increased vulnerability to failure (Busanich et al., 2016). Certainly, in several accounts there is evidence of a possibly dangerous obsession with running. Such participants spoke of running at least once a day and of escalating their running targets. Suzy who managed the professional-support team in a legal-practice, was typical in noting, 'whenever I feel tired after work, I equally feel like I -must-go for a run'.

Analysis of the narrative style of participants' accounts provided a possible explanation for differences in the degree of failure tolerance conferred by running. The failure tolerance benefits of running were associated with the adoption of a reflexive stance towards running. The smaller group of participants who obsessed over their running tended to simply describe their running experiences. By contrast, the larger group of participants, those who were learning to fail-well through running, were more circumspect about their running and demonstrated the reflexivity discussed earlier (Collien, 2018; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017; Vu and Burton, 2020). For instance, Raj, a clinical leader who had been running for many years, reported,

At school and uni I was always first, always top of the class. Now, when running, I am rarely first, and that prompts you to think, 'it's not just about winning is it; I am getting a lot out of this even though it's tough at times'

The autoethnographic data in the form of WhatsApp exchanges over several years between the authors showed how K, a mid-career academic-manager, had developed a similar stance to Raj. Whereas, in earlier exchanges, K's posts were of races and times, in a typical later exchange, K commented 'my time was shockingly bad, but the cakes and conversation were good. I sometimes think that these are the only reasons I do this'. For K, as with many participants who had learnt to fail-well through running, this reflexive stance enabled the benefits of running for learning to fail-well to be realised. Such reflexivity aligned with both the individual's length of experience of running and with her or his membership of a running community. The failure tolerance benefits of running appear, therefore, related both to exposure to the sport and whether it was experienced socially.

## Discussion and conclusion: *Running, identity and learning to fail-well*

The findings have shown that as managers typically encounter intractable failures, so learning *from* failure is insufficient for managerial wellbeing. The enquiry has addressed a gap in current understanding, namely, how managers can learn *to* fail, that is to fail-well. Therefore, the aim of this article has been to systematically theorise the process of failing-well. As managerial identities are associated with achievement or at least, with bouncing back quickly from failure, so encounters with intractable failures have existential significance, threatening the sense-of-self. Occupational failures might thus readily be internalised as, 'I am a failure' (Gabriel et al., 2010). In learning to fail-well, managers do not simply need to behave differently but to 'be' differently, to become a different type of manager. Therefore, the theoretical foundations of the article were built upon the social constructionist understanding of identity. This identity lens was used empirically to analyse the popular managerial leisure activity of running. Hence, the research questions that informed this article were: how do experiences of intractable failure impact managerial identities, how does running alleviate experiences of intractable failure and how can an identity interpretation of running advance the theorisation of learning to fail-well? The findings suggest that learning to fail-well can be theorised in three ways.

First, intractable failures attributable to managerial work can be tolerated when the identity threat is minimised through finding a valued sense-of-self beyond the workplace. Running is a potentially useful identity resource for supplementing or restoring a managerial sense-of-self. For example, in the short-term at least running reinforced managers' sense of being the sort of person that organisations want managers to be, that is competitive and successful. However, the findings showed that running typically had a more beneficial impact for managers themselves. Running became a distinct identity, eclipsing the managerial role as the primary source of self. Running gave managers the agency to reinvent themselves in an alternative, aspirational and thereby less vulnerable way. The post-dualist, affective and embodied turns in managerial enquiry (Gherardi, 2017; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2022; Satama et al., 2022; Steyaert, 2022), served to highlight how running enabled managers to fail-well. Identities anchored in the managerial role were largely defined within the discursive domain, a domain inextricably associated with experiences of intractable failure. By contrast, running provided a kinaesthetic identity resource for defining the self within the corporeal domain. As seen, while this corporeal domain offered no immunity to failure, failure was encountered on runners' own terms and was thereby by no means as corrosive of the existential self.

Second, workplace managerial communities are typically tenuous and competitive (Stone, 2021). Therefore, being a manager is an isolating experience and managers feel the weight of intractable failures personally while also feeling pressured to deny failure. By contrast, running groups beyond the workplace were found to be substantive and supportive communities. New group members were able to appropriate the positive identity positions role-modelled by established members and thereby distinguish themselves from non-members such as the managers they previously were (Ybema, 2020). Within these communities, experiences of failure were collectively accepted, processed, understood and thereby normalised. Positive meanings were attributed to failures and failures could be more of a 'badge-of-honour' than successes. Such communities benefitted members at an existential level by providing sheltered workspaces for the collective and reflexive formation of the alternative identity positions discussed earlier (Beech et al., 2021; Callagher et al., 2021; Mowles, 2017; Rostron, 2022b). Therefore, membership of these personally chosen communities, enabled desired identities to be constructed and sustained (Brown, 2020) which countered the identity corroding effects of intractable workplace failures.

Third, ironically, while running is fundamentally about improving speed, the ups and downs of running encouraged runners to slow down and take a longer-view, recognising that for all but the most elite athletes, failures in running inevitably outnumber successes (Shipway and Holloway, 2016). In identity terms, the increased exposure to the discrete and manageable failures of running prompted non-judgemental acceptance of the inevitability of failure and served to neutralise failure as an existential threat. Runners build existential-toughness and resilience, become tolerant of their limitations and achieve a sense of empowerment (Baxter, 2021; McGannon et al., 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2018), and the results here have confirmed that the fortitude of a running self, displaces the fragility of a managerial self. The key to this displacement lay in the individual's reflexive capability (Vu and Burton, 2020). Reflexivity enabled an evaluation of the structures of dominance regulating the self and the discernment of how a desired sense-of-self could be achieved, unburdened from the corrosive effects of managerial failure.

Therefore, running afforded an alternative identity resource to that derived from structurally determining managerial roles. Running was a resource over which individuals had both personal and collective agency and which afforded resilience, displacing a sense of inadequacy, and enabled flourishing in the face of failure. While running is thus a beacon for the process of learning to fail-well, these theoretical conclusions suggest that learning to fail-well is not limited to the kinaesthetic domain. Failing-well could equally well be achieved by drawing upon identity resources deriving from domains beyond the discursive and cognitive source of the problem, such as the artistic or spiritual domains.

Certain limitations of the enquiry can, though, be acknowledged. First, the research was shaped by our being participant researchers. However, such positionality generated reflective participant data and reflexive autoethnographic data, thereby ensuring a robust account of theoretical relevance (Thanem and Knights, 2019). Second, different theories could undoubtedly have been applied to the data and might have suggested alternative conclusions (Driver, 2017). Third, running is a diverse sport with limited commonality between disciplines (Baxter, 2021) and, of course, most managers do not run. Nonetheless, from this specific theorising and case study, valuable new theoretical knowledge of wider relevance has emerged. Future research could, though, usefully investigate managers' experience of failure *per se* and the experiences of non-running-managers who engage in other self-defining activities beyond work.

Current grand challenges such as climate change combined with increasing expectations on managers to achieve more with less, bring the likelihood of ever more frequent managerial encounters with failure. Therefore, managers need to learn to live with failure, to fail-well, and there are clear implications for managerial education from the theorisation advanced here. First, managerial education needs to enable managers to question their relationship with failure. The default, defensive attitude to failure needs challenging and failure needs normalising to harness its potential (Corlett et al., 2019; Hay, 2014; Syed, 2015). While seeing failure as an opportunity for quick redress and for learning is understandable and no bad thing, managers also need to appreciate that learning to live with failure yields greater benefits over the longer term. Managers need to learn to embrace failure and to live with fragility and lack (Driver, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2010). Managers can thereby appreciate that, 'whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (*II Corinthians 12:10*, cited in Deslandes, 2020) and find comfort in discomfort (Vu et al., 2018). Second, certain manager education pedagogies support the development of identity strategies for failing-well. Educators might, therefore, give more attention to using critically reflective and reflexive practices. Such practices enable manager-learners (and manager educator themselves) to examine who they are, who they are wanting to be and who they could be, and to discern and address the structural factors that inhibit the realisation of possible selves (Collien, 2018; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017). Through managerial exchanges, mentoring and

purposeful role-modelling, managerial-learners are exposed to diverse managerial identity positions. Less naturally reflexive managers can thereby discern that failures do not define an individual. Such pedagogies help cultivate a holistic sense-of-self drawing upon alternative identity sources from communities beyond the workplace that build and sustain the ontological resilience to fail-well.

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