



How to Lose Like a Champ

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Second place. In the Olympics, it means you won silver. In the A/E/C world, it means you lost. In the words of the immortal Ricky Bobby of *Talladega Nights: the Legend of Ricky Bobby*, “If you’re not first, you’re last.” All the work you put into finding the lead, chasing the project, research, and writing—perhaps you even had the in-person interview. The chances are good that you gave up your nights and your weekends. You cranked out extra work, you went the extra mile, you did everything you could think of to win this project. The stars were aligned. You left it all on the table. The mic drop was perfect.

But after the excruciating waiting period, the award letter comes... you open it. No. It’s not your firm’s name at the top of the list. Reality sinks in: you lost the project. That revenue you were counting on: gone. That project that would keep your staff afloat: missing. That celebration dinner at your favorite restaurant: canceled.

So much of what we read about A/E/C marketing is about being a winner. But the truth is, losing also comes with the job. In fact, most of us lose about twice as often as we win. The natural reaction is to move on as quickly as possible and charge ahead. However, putting the hard losses behind you too quickly can hurt your long game. What if instead of moving past it quickly, you stayed with that loss for a while, really dealt with it and got to know it? What might you learn?

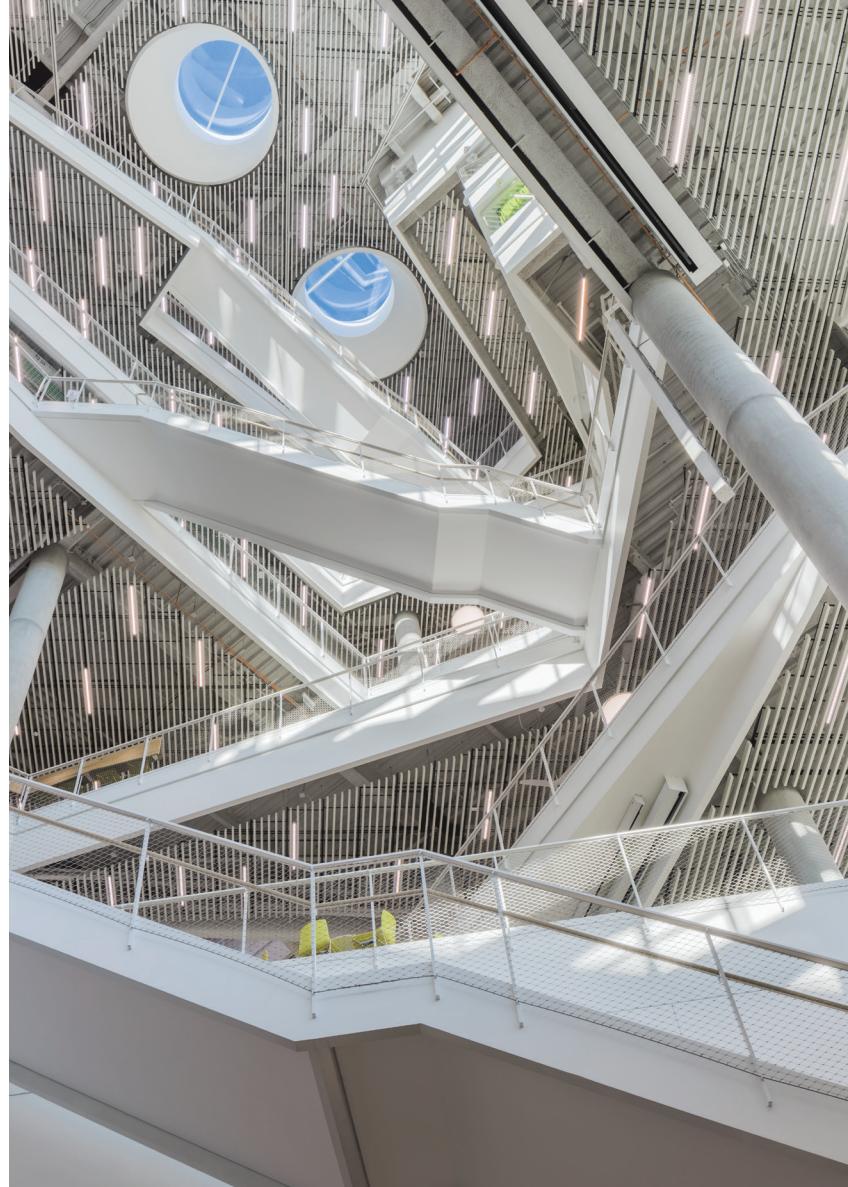
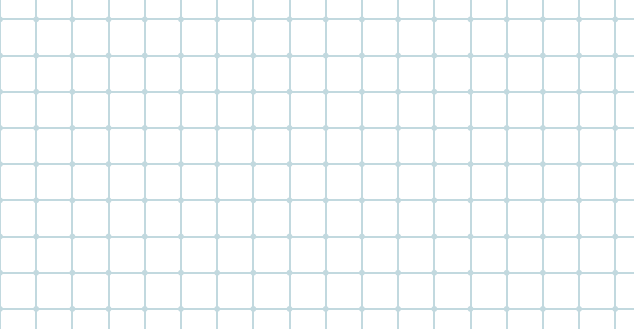
We can learn a lot more from losing than we can from winning. Losing is an opportunity to hone your strategy. It’s a sign that there is still more to do and more to say. And if we have the courage to listen deeply, we can bounce back smarter and stronger.

Acknowledge the hurt. In conversations with my colleagues, I’ve heard them say, “It feels like a punch to the gut” or “I’m in shock.” What you’re dealing with is grief. While we typically think of grief surrounding death or major trauma, any loss can result in a spectrum of grief reactions. According to *Psychology Today*, grief is the acute pain that accompanies loss.

Describe it. Often, there’s a physical reaction to losing. My stomach drops, my body sags, and I feel like a dull weight sits inside me for several days. It can make it hard to concentrate on your next task. Acknowledging the pain of loss can decrease it. Just naming it takes away some of the impact.

Take care. Taking care of your physical self with healthy support can change your state of mind. Try a warming cup of tea, a walk, some yoga, and deep breathing. Do things that you know make your physical self feel better. Go ahead. Be kind to yourself.

Give yourself some time. If it’s a big loss, it can take several weeks to feel better about it. Sometimes it’s worth it to take an afternoon off or take a day to recoup on your own. Work with your supervisor to see if you can build in or plan for some time to recover.



Avoid the blame game. A common response to losing is to blame someone else—your technical staff, the graphic designer, that person in marketing. If you jump to blaming, you lose the opportunity to fix the things that are within your control.

Edit your inner dialogue. Our minds play tricks on us all the time, feeding us thoughts that aren't necessarily true. If we listen to them without evaluating their validity, it can result in destructive behavior. Here are a few common ones that you can nip in the bud when they start to bubble up:

It's all my fault. This is rarely the case. Step back and look at your overall pursuit strategy.

I can't do this marketing job. Yes, you can. Learning from your losses will make you better.

I'll never win. With a smart retooling of your approach, you can.

Do an internal debrief. Gather your pursuit team and sit down together for 30 minutes to talk about the process. This isn't about assigning blame. Rather, focus on what worked well and what could be improved. As a result of internal debriefs, my teams have changed workflows, switched up tools, and clarified responsibilities. We've also adjusted timeframes for future pursuits. A good simple agenda for this meeting is: 1) What worked, 2) What didn't work, and 3) What will we do differently next time?

Do an external debrief. Sit down with your client and ask them what you can do to improve your next proposal. Talk to multiple selection committee members, if possible. This is a great way to further relationships and has yielded dozens of good insights for

me. Sometimes you can get copies of the competitions' proposals that can be a gold mine of information.

Call and congratulate the winner. This sounds crazy, and it's the hardest thing to do on the list. However, your competition is the only person who really knows how hard you worked. Our clients often don't know what they are asking us to do when they issue RFPs and interview invites. The person who can best understand your loss is the person who won. A few years ago, I started calling my competition to say, "Congratulations! We really hustled for that job, but you beat us fair and square." Surprisingly, the winners have been incredibly gracious. For me, these conversations have resulted in new teaming partnerships and new sources of intel in the marketplace.

It's important to work through the losses rather than plow on. Losing like a champ by getting in there and doing the messy work of figuring out the "why" behind your loss will help you win the next one. ■

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Katherine is HDR's Alaska area Business Development Lead, responsible for overseeing business development and marketing for aviation, highways, freight rail, and maritime market sectors. Katherine's super-power is collaboration. Her commitment, drive, and energy build effective teams to capture work for transportation clients. In her spare time, Katherine keeps up with her outdoorsy family. She loves reading, failing forward in her garden, and playing Fleetwood Mac covers on her ukulele.