

Is survivorship bias getting in the way of your self improvement?

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We study how to be more successful by looking at how great business people do things. Perhaps this is fatally flawed. We never see all the failures to see how they failed.

David McRaney in his article "[Survivorship Bias](#)" says:

The Misconception: You should study the successful if you wish to become successful.

The Truth: When failure becomes invisible, the difference between failure and success may also become invisible.

The problem is that there can be common patterns how all the failed business have that you just don't see because they are never studied. In the article (which is a long read but worth it) he gives the example of WWII air force generals coming to top statisticians asking them where to add armor to bombers so fewer are shot down. The top brass got it totally wrong due to survivor bias in the data.

The military looked at the bombers that had returned from enemy territory. They recorded where those planes had taken the most damage. Over and over again, they saw the bullet holes tended to accumulate along the wings, around the tail gunner, and down the center of the body. Wings. Body. Tail gunner. Considering this information, where would you put the extra armor? Naturally, the commanders wanted to put the thicker protection where they could clearly see the most damage, where the holes clustered. But Wald said no, that would be precisely the wrong decision. Putting the armor there wouldn't improve their chances at all.

The correct answer was to put armor where the surviving planes did not have holes because those are the places that the shot down planes had been hit in! Genius. Saved a lot of lives over the "obvious decision".

So where in your business life or personal improvement are you reading only about success stories? Following the "top ten ways Ms X succeeded" and trying to do those ten things in your life. Perhaps some study or thought on how the other 90% of folks failed and then avoiding those might be more useful....

Additional credit: I was tipped off to David's article by author Charles Hugh Smith who's blog is www.oftwominds.com and covers collapse, economics and future of society.