



ARE YOU FAILING OFTEN ENOUGH TO ACHIEVE YOUR POTENTIAL?

Using success and failure to make progress

1. Rather than taking one big step in a complex context that involves plenty of risk, decide a direction and take many smaller steps that keep moving you in the desired direction.
2. Don't decide your whole plan upfront but do have plans for short-term action. It's quite possible that unexpected surprises (both positive and negative) will emerge. Having a fixed plan often means emergent opportunities are missed. Mishaps might also be handled differently if now obviously faulty plans aren't cast in stone.
3. In complex contexts, keep your different options open for as long as possible. Closing down options may support efficiency, but the cost is potentially reduced resilience in the event of unexpected challenges.
4. Use multiple small, safe-to-fail probes that test plausible ways forward. If a good few fail then you'll know you're pushing the envelope! If none of your probes fail then it's quite likely you're not maximising available opportunities in your context.

First steps...

We've never met anyone who loves failing, have you? Truth is, our brains tend to become wired in ways which makes us prefer to avoid failure. Usually, failing is associated with pain. Success, on the other hand, pairs with pleasure. It's a no-brainer which state most people choose in a forced-choice situation.

Yet, so much of who we are and what we've achieved stems at least in equal part from failure as from success. Not that you remember it, but reflect back on the effort and drive it will have required to successfully take your very first steps on two legs. Learning how to communicate and being understood took much longer and needed even greater effort. Those significant successes were built on a vast, essential platform of prior failures.

Few of those early failures came from radical initiatives. Mostly, they were incremental. Progress was iterative – you were sorting out what worked from what didn't. It wasn't just the clichéd 'try and try again until you succeed'.

Doing exactly the same thing and hoping for a different outcome is quickly identified as a wasted way of spending time and energy without making progress. Rather, as you tried again and again, you did things slightly differently. Iterations brought minor improvements that, in their totality, contributed to the successful outcomes you were seeking.

Interestingly, as you applied that learning process more widely, it is largely the successes that are remembered. The many accompanying failures (or stepping-stones) are forgotten.

Not failing enough?

Organisations can be very much like people in this way. Success is important and, no doubt, often tightly bound up with reputation and brand. You prefer that minor slip-ups don't happen and are likely terrified of an organisation-induced major calamity.

A key reason is that kind of 'bad news' attracts and sells media or, at the very least, unwanted attention. Even reading about stories of organisational failure is likely to plant subtle but strong suggestions that failure can be very expensive. Take for example the disastrous collapse of the Dick Smith business. You wouldn't have wanted any part in that fiasco, and the ungracious demise of the Australian icon certainly delivered a media bonanza. In fairness to the media, they are simply feasting on a range of cognitive biases that cause us to pay attention to events based on their degree of unexpectedness and scale of impact.

So, we do get caught up by extreme cases, where failure is terminal. But are those fears, with such a low probability of affecting your organisation, worthy of the status you afford them? Financier Simon Beckett

told a BRW Momentum Series event, "it's like crawling over broken glass to get things done in large organisations". Largely, it's about aversion to risk and anything that might challenge the status quo. At the heart of that is a deep-seated fear of failure.

Reframing success and failure

It might be helpful to reframe the scenario. Shouldn't organisations be far more fearful of *not* making the innovations of which they're capable? Indeed, they ought to be concerned that incremental change doesn't happen because of aversion to risk.

Few stop to consider that the risk of standing still may in reality be greater than the risk of innovating. All too often these sluggish organisations are unable to respond adequately when the warning signs suddenly become crystal clear. By then, it's too late to become interested in innovating. The ultimate cost for earlier stagnation is beyond anything previously contemplated.

This is a particularly present issue for the many organisations being challenged by game-changing shifts in entire industries. Moving from industrial- to knowledge- oriented businesses is very challenging. It's also risky. Not moving though is extremely short sighted. Those who mistakenly think they're not affected may be in the most danger because they just won't see the nasty hit coming.

Two sides of the same coin

Success and failure are mostly two sides of the same coin. A string of failures, followed by innovation and persistence, often leads to a measure of success. On the other hand, success itself has often also been a key precursor for failure. Organisations are understandably drawn to keep doing what made them successful – remembering and repeating only the final steps. If they reflected more deeply, they'd recognise how their success was as much about the means as it was about the end.

Importantly, success is usually born from continuously trying different things (that may not always work) and learning from past efforts to make future improvements. It's a key characteristic of start-ups, which is why Dr Amantha Imber of Invention advises organisations, regardless of size or maturity, to start thinking like start-ups again.

Make safe-to-fail experiments part of your process

Organisations (or individuals) that bet the house on risky big moves should be fearful. A better way is to take rapid, small steps, none of which would sink the ship on their own. Complexity expert Dave Snowden suggests using safe-to-fail probes to navigate complex challenges. Initiate a number of small experiments simultaneously and test which ideas are most useful moving forward. In this context, failure mitigates risk.