

What is the key to understanding and benefiting from failure?

Much has been written about the importance of learning to fail and fail well, which has become a mantra of almost every innovative startup around the world. But beyond the rallying cries, motivational slogans and glib Instagram posts, what does any of this really mean?

In my experience, the answer to both these questions can be found by looking at how successful organisations create a culture of collaboration and, with this, the stamina to address their failures openly and accurately.

Of course, cultivating any progressive approach to failure is challenging and rarely achieved quickly. If an organisation has a deeply embedded culture of blame or leans towards discipline as a go-to tactic, it's harder still.

“Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions!”

We have all heard this phrase – in fact, it may have even passed our own lips a few times. Sounds strong, doesn't it? But successful leaders know that genuine solutions only come from a comprehensive understanding of a problem. This requires a willingness to discuss all of the available information, and –

unavoidably – much of that comes from problems.

Long term success is rarely achieved when organisations don't even want to acknowledge failure, let alone discuss it.

In truth, very few organisations set out to ignore their failings. However, many drift towards the kind of informal practices and cultures that subtly discourage the identification of mistakes and with it, the active sharing of failure data.

When our teams are under pressure and lines of communication are stretched, there is a greatly increased likelihood of this. The pandemic is almost the perfect storm for this with remote working, market unpredictability, growing complexity, high stress, and reduced organisational capacity.

Despite the challenges, we know that thriving organisations are more open to discussing their failures. This is important because the richest source of information often sits in the gap between what happened and what should have happened. If this is understood, it's much easier to implement solutions that close that gap.

Sharing information

Fear of sharing negative information buries risk and increases both the frequency and the scale of future errors. Organisations that successfully protect a culture in which positive and negative information is treated as equals are always going to be far better placed to make fully informed decisions throughout any crisis.

In practice, these behaviours can only come from a top-down acceptance that problems will always occur, that many of these are worth solving and that in the longer term, a structured supportive and shared approach is always going to outperform any adhoc one.

In the workplace, the brutal reality is that solving complex problems as an individual – trapped within an organisational silo – is stressful, seriously fatiguing and extremely ineffective.

Under these conditions, precious stamina – be it physical or mental – is quickly

exhausted. The energy that would be best directed towards long-term solutions is reoriented towards quick-fixes, workarounds, denial, blame and, in some circumstances, even coverups. Left unaddressed, problems become engrained, they increase in size, multiply and inevitably the cycle of failure becomes more and more difficult to break.

Here are my top tips for solving problems and learning from failure:

Solve problems in robust, diverse teams

Define problems clearly

Promote analysis (data) over narrative (storytelling)

Start with 'what caused this?' and never with 'who caused this?'

Evaluate all possible solutions

Prioritise the need to learn from the event

Share that learning quickly, openly and freely

Ask yourself:

Does your organisation have a truly objective approach to information?

How easy is it to discuss negative events in your organisation?

Have you become addicted to good news stories?

All individuals and organisations make mistakes. A fear of understanding the failure or sharing critical information will only increase the frequency and scale of future errors.

Benefitting from failure takes stamina and that stamina can be cultivated with the right approach.

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