

# How Leaders Promote Intelligent Failure

## *Be a role model*

- Share your failures and learnings.** Focus on your role, never blaming.
- Talk about your real limitations**, what you're struggling with, and the things you don't know.
- Ask for feedback.** Reward those who share their honest perspectives. Share back what you learned.
- Ask your staff to voice concerns** and invite input on how things might be improved.
- Monitor your responses to bad news**, tough questions, and things you don't agree with. Strive to reward these messengers for giving you the information you need to improve.

## *Support and lead your team to fail intelligently*

- Make blameless debriefs a habit.** Explore *what happened* and *how it happened* never *who did it*.
- Reward staff for learning** and moving forward more wisely.
- Make it safe to share an early-stage idea** by avoiding the urge to poke holes and shut it down. Instead ask curious questions to help improve the idea.
- Do a pre-mortem before kicking off new initiatives.** Frame complex work in terms of what you hope to learn, and as a team uncover the failures that might be expected.
- Be clear about the goal** of the team's efforts so that failure is easier to detect. We want to get good at detecting small 'f' failures so you never get to a big 'F' one.
- Share stories of past failures and the valuable learning.** Don't forget to share stories of inaction (the risks you should have taken but didn't) as much as failures of action.
- Be clear about what kinds of failures are acceptable** in pursuit of innovation and risk taking and what acts will always be unacceptable.
- Articulate where innovation is most needed** versus where good enough is good enough.
- To create the flexibility needed to innovate, work with political forces to **hold your team accountable for outcomes, not outputs or dollars spent.**
- Build agility into your budgets.** Account for the resources required to learn, adapt and change course.
- Support people to **stop certain activities** or cut projects to create room for innovation.
- Become a barrier buster.** Help your staff identify and address the barriers to innovation.

## *When failure strikes*

- Detect early. Analyze blamelessly. Prioritize time to focus on what can be learned.
- Never throw someone else under the bus.
- Help others involved reflect on and learn from the experience by asking curious 'how' and 'what' questions.
- Apply the learning by changing mindsets, behaviours and processes accordingly. Innovate and try again more wisely. Or overcome your sunk cost bias and quit/let go to wisely make room for something else.
- Take responsibility and share your story of failure with the following framing:  
I tried \_\_\_\_\_. My failure was \_\_\_\_\_. I learned \_\_\_\_\_. Now I will \_\_\_\_\_.
- Continue to support innovation, experimentation and smart risk taking after the failure.