

# Ideas for Intelligent Failure

By Ashley Good

## At a Glance

- Maximizing our learning and creating space for innovation to thrive requires acceptance of a certain level of failure.
- In a rapidly changing world *intelligent failure* will be increasingly important for solving problems.
- Rewarding effort, not just outcomes, helps encourage those around us to pursue innovation.
- A more productive relationship with failure, whether our own or that of others, requires focusing on what was learned.

## A Rapidly Changing World

**We're taught how to succeed. In contrast, all we're taught about failure is to avoid it at all costs.**

It's no surprise that we react badly to failure, and too often miss the opportunity to learn and improve – because we don't know how to *fail intelligently*.

In most workplaces, failure is not an option and when it does happen comes with undesirable consequences. The vast majority of us do not have space to try something new, possibly fail, learn and improve.

And yet, the pace of change of our world has surpassed our ability to learn<sup>1</sup> and to have the knowledge needed to solve our most important challenges.

This means that we don't have the answers to many of the problems we wish to solve and in order to reach a solution we have to try, fail and adapt based on what we learn. In this way we can evolve our way to a workable but ever-changing solution.

This is *failing intelligently*: using failure as a means of accelerating our ability to learn to solve our toughest challenges.

## Learning to Fail Intelligently

**Not all failures are created equally. They can range from blameworthy to praise worthy<sup>2</sup> and are often dynamic with time and perspective.**

The seven ideas presented next are intended to help you and your organization create space for praiseworthy failures and maximize what can be learned from blameworthy ones.

### 1. Change starts with you

In times of failure, choose to avoid the instinctive defensive reactions that prevent learning such as ignoring it happened, denying responsibility, blaming external factors, trying to fix it before anyone notices, etc. Instead choose to reframe the failure in terms of what can be learned from it.

When a colleague or partner fails, instead of punishment or reprimand, inquire about what they learned with curiosity and appreciation.

<sup>1</sup> Eddie Obeng, [worldaftermidnight.com](http://worldaftermidnight.com)

<sup>2</sup> Amy C. Edmondson, Strategies for Learning from Failure, Harvard Business Review April 2011, [hbr.org/archive-toc/BR1104](http://hbr.org/archive-toc/BR1104)

## 2. Include management & leadership

The culture of an organization or team is largely driven by its leadership. Convene a discussion about *intelligent failure* at the highest level and find a champion there who will drive this change by role modeling *intelligent failure* and creating appropriate rewards, incentives and recognition programs for those who do the same.

It is relatively easy to convince someone that an acceptance of failure is required for innovation and learning to thrive. What is hard is taking action which aligns with this sentiment. It is possible to go ahead without the support of management but for the culture of an organization to change sustainably, management should be willing to take action and set the stage for a change in how everyone reacts to and uses failures.

## 3. Create and communicate a strategy

Develop a strategy for how failure will be used at your organization. Describe why *intelligent failure* is important in your context and how your organization plans to use it to achieve your goals and vision.

By defining the walls of the sandbox (i.e. how much and what kind of failure is actually accepted) and communicating this, transparency and risk taking will be easier for everyone.<sup>3</sup>

## 4. Identify gaps in capacity

Identify the core attributes required to carry out your organization's strategy for failure. Because most of us are not taught how to fail well, it is likely many of these attributes will require practice.

In particular, essential skills that often require practice include the ability to:

- Clearly define goals so that failure is recognizable;
- Internalize responsibility for a failure and communicate it blamelessly;
- Decouple one's ego from their activity in order to look at the situation objectively and listen to different perspectives with an open mind;
- Get beyond first attribution of blame and uncover the root causes of failures; and
- Adapt according to what is learned from the failure.

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<sup>3</sup> Charlene Li, [blogs.hbr.org/2011/03/the-art-of-admitting-failure](https://blogs.hbr.org/2011/03/the-art-of-admitting-failure)

## 5. Use tangible tools and processes

Creating tools and processes that promote *intelligent failure* formalizes the shift in culture. These tangible practices, embedded into existing structures, are often required for meaningful and lasting change.

This might be as simple as including an open discussion about what failed at weekly meetings, to something more involved such as developing metrics and evaluation criteria around failure, learning and adaption for performance reviews of people and projects<sup>4</sup>.

Other examples include publishing an annual failure report<sup>5</sup>, holding ideation meetings<sup>6</sup>, including your failure strategy in the employee handbook<sup>7</sup>, hosting a failure conference<sup>8</sup>, and instating dedicated innovation time<sup>9</sup>.

## 6. Assess and adapt

A change in how your organization accepts and reacts to failures will take time and chances are your first ideas and strategies will not work as intended.

Therefore, it is important to start with a willingness to change and continuously assess the effectiveness of your actions and adapt based on what is working and what is not.

## 7. Learn from others in your network

Look for people who are creating similar changes to you. Perhaps they are colleagues in a different department, or people outside of your organization or industry.

Share your stories with them about what you have tried, what worked and what did not and have them do the same. Build a community of people who are practicing *intelligent failure* who can push you to continuously improve and inspire you with new ideas and insights.

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<sup>4</sup> Public Broadcasting Station, [blogs.hbr.org/2013/09/how-i-got-my-team-to-fail-more](https://blogs.hbr.org/2013/09/how-i-got-my-team-to-fail-more)

<sup>5</sup> Engineers Without Borders Canada, [ewb.ca/reports](http://ewb.ca/reports)

<sup>6</sup> IDEO Design Thinking, [ideo.org](http://ideo.org)

<sup>7</sup> Valve, [assets.sbnation.com/assets/1074301/Valve\\_Handbook\\_LowRes.pdf](https://assets.sbnation.com/assets/1074301/Valve_Handbook_LowRes.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> FailCon, [thefailcon.com](http://thefailcon.com)

<sup>9</sup> Google, [innovationfactory.eu/blog/2009/02/09/innovate-the-google-way](http://innovationfactory.eu/blog/2009/02/09/innovate-the-google-way)