Tips for Running a Fail Faire

1. **Start with a Lot of Personal, Old-Fashioned, Direct Outreach for Both Participants and Presenters.**
   Identify those in your network who are more agile, less bureaucratic, and less resistant to talk about and learn from failure. Have many conversations to introduce/warm them up to this radical new idea long in advance. Explain the concept, the goals, and the format of the event. Build your number of supporters who will a) participate, and especially b) present. This process is critical in order to get to #2: You need buy-in, advocates, people who are into it early on.

2. **Have the Right People in the Room.**
   You want people who are there to learn, not to be voyeuristic; there to be constructive, not to be snarky or malevolent. You want people who genuinely care about their work and want to do better; people who are ok with some irreverence and humour, because failure is hard to talk about without it. This type of event is great for building (or strengthening) community, so try to keep the audience targeted and relevant to your focus or topic. Promote the event among people you think will get the most out of it – those who value different ways of learning.

3. **Plan the Presentations/Case-Studies.**
   To confirm a stellar line-up of smart, honest and brave presenters for both FailFaire NYC and FailFaire DC, we made both an open solicitation for presentations (online or email submission) and sent personally tailored requests to some of our contacts (refer to #1 above – it’s all about relationships!).

   It helps when the presenters are people who have also had notable successes. As an attendee at the first ever FailFaire in New York noted: “It’s easier to admit your failures when you are self-confident, and you will also have credibility because of your successes.”

   We ask our presenters to focus on the storytelling aspect (and not worry too much about the slides) to help personalize and illustrate the major lessons and take-aways. Tell us:
   - What were you trying to do?
   - What was the failure/where did it go wrong and why?
   - What would you do differently next time (or never do again!)?
   - What broader lessons can be learned?

   We are partial to the “ignite” style format – quick presentations at 10 minutes or shorter. Organizations hosting internal FailFaires may choose a different format in order to maximize learning and promote actionable lessons that can be embedded into future work. Everyone’s mental wheels will be actively turning by the end of the presentations, so make sure you leave time for questions and discussions around the room.

4. **Set Ground Rules.**
   To make sure everyone is aware of how his or her presentation will be received, it’s important to set a few ground rules so that everyone is on the same page. Ours include:
   - No live streaming of event
   - Blogging/tweeting is allowed unless someone says that a presentation or parts of the presentation (or a comment, question, or discussion) are off the record
• For pictures, ask permission before taking so that anyone who does not want to be known to have presented or attended isn’t inadvertently outing by a photo
• No third party bashing – presenters must have been personally involved in the project they are showcasing in some way
• Slides will not be made public unless the presenter him/herself puts them out there
• It’s perfectly ok for presenters to be there in their personal capacity rather than with their organizational affiliation and say so

You can set your own rules based on how public/private you want your FailFaire to be – just be sure that everyone knows the rules up front.

5. Create an atmosphere.
Even though this may be a bit controversial among the more dour types, we have emphasized creating a safe space in a neutral, nonthreatening venue (for example, don’t pick the board room). We think it might be best to host the FailFaire outside of an office setting all together. Provide drinks (trust us, it helps) and food to encourage chatting, networking, and the loosening of ties and guards. Enable real conversations – no formal nametags, tentcards or over-structured agenda elements. We are a fan of hosting FailFaires in the evening, after formal work hours, and start with at least half an hour of friendly mingling and a glass of wine before presentations even begin.

6. Have The Right Attitude and Tone.
There should be a real commitment to LEARNING from failure. Make it clear that failure is no reason to be ashamed, and reinforce the belief that there is value in learning from mistakes. Balance levity with responsibility – allow yourselves to laugh at mistakes, and cut yourselves a break without losing sight of the gravity of failing. In our field, there is trust, people’s livelihoods, donor money, and even beneficiary lives on the line if we fail. At the same time, talking about failure can be very hard and making it easier with a gentle way to make fun of ourselves can help. Again, this is something that is not for everyone and in some cases, not appropriate.

7. Choose a Moderator/Host.
It’s important to have a moderator to keep the schedule moving, set down the ground rules, emphasize the goals, and make people feel comfortable (humor really helps!). If necessary, the moderator can close down unhelpful comments in a firm but friendly way (this is about learning, not about blame or criticism).

The moderator should be someone neutral who either doesn’t have skin in the game (for example, if it’s an internal event, not someone who can hire/fire), or works with or in support of the community/organizations represented in the room but not in a position of being a funder/donor, etc. Avoid anything that can alter the dynamic of the participants or cause people to censor their remarks for fear of looking bad.

Conclusion
In the end, we work hard and we care about our work. It’s only going to help us improve if we share and learn from things gone wrong rather than sweep them under the rug. Hosting a FailFaire can be a great way for your respective field or organization to openly discuss failed work and learn from the past, especially in the nonprofit and NGO fields where we are so reluctant to discuss our shortcomings in any public (or constructive) way. Good luck!

Adapted from How To: Roll Your Own FailFaire by Katrin Verclas

http://failfaire.org/2010/07/29/how-to-roll-your-own-failfaire/ (website no longer active)