What We've Learned about Communicating Failure

INTRODUCTION

Talking about failure is difficult. Here you will find some communication tips that both lead to deeper learning and hopefully keep everyone's ego intact. Nevertheless, this likely is still going to be a challenge.

No one likes failure. It comes with real risk and everyone is affected by it and reacts differently. Bruce Nussbaum wrote a post on his Creative Intelligence Book site called Stop Fetishizing Failure which says,

> *"The thing about this fetching of failure is that is can work if you're at Stanford or Harvard and you were lucky enough to be born into a well-off family and went to a good school and were brought up to be and feel accomplished and secure enough to make failure a feature of your learning. But be aware of the fallacy of failure. It is celebrated only when you succeed."*

And it's true. Currently, talking about and learning from failure is a luxury for only the most strong and secure. Framing your work as experiments, where prototyping and 'failing fast' in the name of innovation, is also a rare opportunity for most. Certainly the dogged self-assuredness and supportive environment that lends itself to speedy recoveries in times of failures are advantages afforded to few.

It was in recognizing those challenges that this document was written. These are ideas, suggestions and a selection of best practices intended to offer some guidance for navigating these tricky waters. These approaches will not be appropriate for all contexts, so adapt what is here to fit your needs so that you, your team, and your organization can learn, innovate and build resilience in the face of failure.

When everyone speaks openly about failures we can implicitly say "If you have no failure to discuss, you are not being honest, or you are not being innovative." It's a paradigm shift. An acceptance of failure genuinely turns the concept of performance on its head: you aren't underperforming if you fail; you're underperforming if you don't admit failure, because when we admit failure we all learn from it.

BEST PRACTICES

Take the time to create a safe space for dialogue. The first activity in the The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation Failing Forward Activities document focuses on what we call Failure Foundations – that is the factors that exists individually, interpersonally, and institutionally which affect our ability to have a dialogue about failure. It is worthwhile to take the time to understand why stakeholders do or do not feel safe discussing their failures and what a safe space would look and feel like for them. If you are interested in our Failure Foundations workshop to do just that, feel free to contact us.

In dialogue, participants should aim to suspend their assumptions and keep an open mind to the various perspectives. A good way to achieve this is to have the group set ground rules that recognize when people share what they believe to be true, opinions need to be respected, different perspectives are relevant, useful and valid, and each participant should be respected as a hardworking, worthy individual.

To maximize learning, stay away from blaming other people or factors you cannot control. Instead, make sure everyone participating in the dialogue internalizes the locus of responsibility. Even if it feels like the situation was 99% out of your control, you always have the agency to act on that 1%.

Participants should only speak of the aspects of the failure to which they contributed and for which they are willing to take responsibility. This will be difficult. Everyone has a natural confirmation bias which makes it very challenging to see that we may be wrong. Treat this the same way you would treat giving someone feedback in that the only time you should ever give constructive or negative feedback is if your genuine reason for offering your perspective is to help the person learn and improve. In this way, you should only ever call out the failure of another person if you wish to genuinely help them recognize another perspective for their benefit and this should be done with appropriate diplomacy. Use this approach to explore how the participants could have acted differently to create a different outcome and in that way learn and adapt how they will act in future situations.

Look for root causes to characterize the failure instead of assigning blame. This means overcoming the fundamental attribution error and going beyond first order reasons. For example, saying "I made the wrong decision which caused the failure" is a first order attribution while taking the time to ask why that decision was made gets to the root cause and likely sounds something more like "I made this assumption based on my interactions, experience and knowledge and failed to notice this crucial piece for this reason which, in turn, caused me to act in this way which resulted in the failure." It is by recognizing oversights and faulty assumptions, and exploring how they were formed, that participants learn how to avoid repeating similar mistakes down the road.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

People learn in practice, so seek out others who are willing to join you as you apply and push these ideas further within your own organization or context. After all, it is virtually impossible to see a failure as a failure while you are in it but in a group everyone comes with their own sets of assumptions that can be articulated and tested for validity.

As Albert Einstein said, "We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." So bringing others into a community of practice is vital for seeing new ways of looking at failures and their potential solutions. It's easy to criticize because nothing is perfect; better than criticizing is working with others to improve their good ideas.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ABOUT FAILURE

Documented failures are often used for many years as case studies for trainings and other knowledge gathering activities. As such, the learning within these stories is often applied long past the time when the failure was relevant to the organization. For this reason, extra attention is warranted to ensure the story is meaningful and representative of as many perspectives as possible while also focusing heavily on what was learned.

Below are some brief points on how to achieve this balance.

The length should be in the ballpark of 450 words to maximize for readability (though this should be very flexible depending on the story). At least half of those words should be dedicated to extracting the learning, suggesting things to do differently and explaining why adapting to the learning is so important.

If you wish to structure these stories, one might be looking for

- Context (critical factors influencing the story such as location, project objectives, assumptions, hypothesis, timeline),
- Specific actions and activities you undertook (while also answering what assumptions led you to act in this way?)
- The result (Why did the failure happen? Then ask “why” a few more times. What happened? What does this mean for the assumptions and hypothesis raised earlier? Why was it a failure? What are the big picture/long-term impacts?)
- The learning (What was learned and has changed because of the failure)
- So What? (What results did changing create or is likely to create, implications for the future, how has the learning been institutionalized, recommendations for other projects in similar situations)

SEEK DEPTH OF LEARNING

To push yourself or other authors for a deeper failure, look for patterns of repeated actions, trends and behaviours you consistently struggle to change. The most meaningful stories are those that caused you to question your own values and/or the project’s theory of change. The first sight of a failure is often emotional. When you feel ashamed, upset, fearful, annoyed, sad, and/or stressed it may be an indicator that there is a failure worth looking into and understanding.

Bring in stakeholders (partners you worked with, project customers/beneficiaries, team members, etc.) to help you understand and write the failure inclusive of their perspective. Safe space for sharing is vital so it’s a good idea to start out talking about appreciation for each person involved and their value beyond the outcome of their work. After all, we often need a group of people discussing failure to really understand and recognize the failure and its root causes.

It is very rare that a meaningful failure was caused by just one person or one thing. Uncovering the root(s) of the issue allows everyone to see the points with the most leverage for avoiding that failure in the future. A simple technique for getting at root causes is to continue to ask “Why?” to its logical end. One can also examine the different categories of “Why?”s such as your own personal actions, the underlying culture, legacies, leadership, management, environment, processes, other people, assumptions, expectations, etc.

Feedback Welcomed

If you find yourself seeking additional support, or have ideas for how we can improve this document, we would love to hear from you.