



# EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING FAILURE

Talking about failure is difficult. These tips (and traps!) are intended to lead to deeper learning while keeping everyone's ego intact.

## LISTENING

## TELLING

### TIPS

- ▶ Ask the teller what they need to feel safe, and act on their response.
- ▶ Remember their courage and their vulnerability.
- ▶ Keep an open mind. The teller's perspective is true, valid, and useful.
- ▶ Respond with curiosity and appreciation. Ask questions that help the teller dive deeper.
  - ▶ Use the phrase "say more about that."
- ▶ Watch for blame. Ask, "how would that person talk about this failure?"

- ▶ Carve out time to reflect on what you have learned, and focus your story on that.
- ▶ Look for root causes -- keep asking "why?"
- ▶ Work to understand the perspective of any other people implicated in your story.
  - ▶ Tell your story as if they are in the room.
- ▶ Look for patterns of repeated actions, trends, or behaviors that you might struggle to change.
- ▶ Share how your listener can help you stay open to feedback and feel safe.

### TRAPS

- ▶ Losing your calm. No judgment; no negativity.
- ▶ Trying to "solve" by offering solutions.
- ▶ Allowing yourself to be distracted by others.
- ▶ Challenging or attempting to change their emotional response, i.e. "it can't be that bad," or "calm down."
  - ▶ If you're feeling uncomfortable with the level of emotion, ask to meet at another time when emotions have settled.
- ▶ Sharing the teller's stories with others without their permission.

- ▶ Blame! Stay away from focusing on others' actions, or on factors you cannot control.
- ▶ Shame! Try to stop dwelling on the failure or taking it too personally.
  - ▶ Failing does not mean **you** are a failure.
- ▶ Acting (or reacting) defensively.
- ▶ Attempting to move too quickly past the experience. Commit to figuring out how the failure can help you move forward more wisely, and focus on that.

For more resources like this, visit  
[www.failforward.org](http://www.failforward.org)