



Recognize failure as a driver of innovation

The challenge

Failure has bad press in business. However, innovation inevitably means failing at times. Indeed, knowing how to fail is an essential condition for long-term success! It is consequently critical to instill a culture of failure in your teams. Failures must be approached with discipline and optimism, in order to capitalize on the lessons they can teach and see them as steps toward success in subsequent projects.

Three best practices to turn failure into a springboard towards success

Establish documentation discipline

It is difficult to know which information you will need to analyze sometimes unexpected results. Note down everything!

► For each decision, ask people to note down their hypotheses, observations and questions. This material will be helpful in drawing lessons from failure.

Recommendation:

Keep an “**experiment notebook**.” For example, an investor has made a habit of noting down the hypotheses and data underlying each decision he makes whether or not to invest. He looks back at his notes several months later to assess the accuracy of these elements. This hindsight approach has enabled him to improve the quality of his decisions.

Expected benefit:

Reviewing your written notes will help you **avoid cognitive biases**—such as saying “It’s exactly as I thought!” with no real basis—, thus making the quality of your feedback more reliable. It will also give you the opportunity to grasp the true impact of factors which may have seemed trivial at first glance.

Seek out failure in the testing phase

We tend to design tests to prove we’re right. Reverse the logic of the tests!

► Attempting to prove your hypothesis wrong is a very beneficial mental exercise.

Recommendation:

- Try to prove yourself wrong. This will lead you to **actively raise questions** which you might have omitted and **search for contradictions**.
- Don’t hesitate to **ask for support from someone outside the team**, who will be more objective in this demanding critical exercise.

Expected benefit:

- You will more rapidly identify **potential flaws** in your hypotheses, and during testing rather than implementation!
- You will clearly recognize the benefits of conducting tests that fail, and thus make it possible to direct efforts optimally.

Ask yourself if it’s really a failure

Many failures contain opportunities waiting to be discovered. Persevere!

► Go beyond the impression of failure.

Recommendation:

- Ask an expert or someone with an outside perspective to **give you a different interpretation** of what you perceive to be a failure. Eli Lilly labs did this, when it was about to stop clinical tests. It asked a mathematician to study the results, and he detected an interpretation error. Tests resumed, leading to the discovery of a powerful cancer-fighting drug.
- Try to **identify the opportunities** offered by a failure, notably by sharing the results with your colleagues. They may be able to spot ways to use them in other domains. It was because Spencer Silver spoke to those around him about his not-so-sticky glue that the Post-It was invented!

Expected benefit:

A different perspective can help to **emerge from an apparent failure** or **find other possible applications**.