

# INNOVATION

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## USING FAILURE TO GENERATE INNOVATION

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June 2018

**Volume:** 31 **Number:** 6

Leadership Abstracts

**Tags:** [Leadership and Organization \(/functional-area/leadership-and-organization\)](#),

[Organizational Culture \(/specialty-area/organizational-culture\)](#)



How does failure help anything? After all, isn't failure always bad? Examples of how individuals or organizations fall short? Most—perhaps all—successful people and organizations have failed, and sometimes even failed frequently and monumentally. The Beatles' first album was rejected. A dozen publishers passed on J.K. Rowling's manuscript

for *Harry Potter*. Penicillin and the smallpox vaccine were discovered from failed experiments. So, what turns a failure into an innovation? Intelligent failure involves telling stories about failing forward, using trial-and-error approaches, being willing to do sometimes difficult and challenging work, being resilient, and receiving support from formal leaders.

## Telling the Story of Failure

Colleges that fail forward communicate stories of failure and how individuals and groups learn from those failures, and through this, find ways to improve processes as well as teaching and learning. For example, at Truckee Meadows Community College, we have engaged in two recent design projects: one involving classrooms and one involving a learning commons model. Faculty, staff, and administration worked on both projects and conducted research to inform the designs of these spaces. Nevertheless, there were still many failures. The high top tables in the redesigned classrooms created a space for easily distracted students to hang out and chat during class rather than be involved in the active learning for which the classroom was initially designed, but there were also elements of the room that worked well. The whiteboard walls and tables, moveable furniture, iPads, and AppleTV were effective for evoking active and engaged learning. We assessed the design by holding a faculty feedback session and using student surveys. Further, after the first semester of the room's use, faculty presented to and provided training for other faculty about the room and pedagogical opportunities. Articulating and communicating the failures and successes of this project led to the development of improved models for future classroom redesign efforts. Specifically, we found that rectangular tables work better than round; lighting should be adjustable for better viewing of projected images; more iPads are helpful for smaller group work; and more comfortable chairs are needed.

## Using Trial-and-Error Approaches

Trial-and-error approaches lend themselves to intelligent failures. For instance, the ongoing learning commons project involves a multiphase development process. The purpose of this project is to create a space where information literacy and academic support services (tutoring) are integrated synergistically to serve students effectively. This project has been purposefully implemented in phases so that we can learn from what works and what does not work in each phase. In the first phase, a furniture company lent the college furniture. We learned what furniture students liked and used most and where it is best placed, which informed ultimate furniture purchases. During this phase, we also integrated tutoring services into this physical environment, which created many disasters in the first year. Students were accustomed to going to a different building for tutoring and not to the library, so tutoring appointments initially declined. The library staff were not used to sharing the space, nor were they used to the noise. We placed the reference desk and the tutoring check-in desk by each other with the idea of greater collaboration between tutoring and information literacy services. This resulted in no one being able to hear at either desk due to high traffic at both.

In our next phase, we will separate these functions and create two reference desks—one on each floor. We also plan to add additional quiet study spaces on the second floor while partitioning off part of the tutoring space with glass to buffer some of the sound. For this project, we conducted research and created a learning commons committee with wide representation from throughout the college. Diverse input and multiphase implementation have enabled us to make improvements in architectural and interior design to fulfill the space's purpose to support to student success.

## Difficult and Challenging Work

Albert E. N. Gray (1940) wrote in *The Common Denominator of Success*, "The successful person has the habit of doing the things failures don't like to do. They don't like doing them either necessarily. But their disliking is subordinated to the strength of their purpose" (p. 4). Being innovative and failing forward require us to do things that are sometimes challenging. In most cases, this requires time and commitment for implementation and reflection. According to Garvin (2013), "Managers have simply not devoted the necessary time and attention to mastering the skills of implementation" (p. 39). Institutions, stakeholders, and leaders need to think systematically about project implementation and to try something for at least two to four years to learn whether it works and how projects can be made even more successful. A productive approach, suggested by Garud and Van de Ven (2000), is to view and enact implementations as "nested sequences of events that unfold over time in the development of individuals, organizations, and industries" (p. 4). This is not to say that colleges should keep doing something that is not working for years, simply forging ahead despite epic failure after failure. Sometimes we do need to abandon ideas. For example, if a college tries a strategy to increase enrollment, but it becomes apparent after only a couple of weeks that it is dramatically hurting enrollment, it should be called off until further research can be done. Specifically, the college or organization should adopt a culture of perseverance, learning, adaptability, and responsiveness by supporting—financially, morally, and philosophically—individuals' and groups' efforts to work toward positive and innovative changes.

## Resilience

Resilience, simply put, is being able to bounce back in the face of adversity. It is what Angela Duckworth (2016) refers to as "grit" and what Carole Dweck (2006) refers to as "growth mindset." Dweck wrote, "Even in the growth mindset, failure can be a painful experience. But it doesn't define you. It's a problem to be faced, dealt with, and learned from" (p. 33). It is about not giving up and committing to a goal while learning from the failures along the way. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d.), factors associated with resilience also include

- The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out.
- A positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities.
- Skills in communication and problem solving.
- The capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses. (para. 9)

Much of this is part of being a well-adjusted human being, and what it means for an organization is providing a supportive, encouraging, and high-trust environment. We all have flaws, insecurities, and a host of other imperfections. Despite this, a critical mass of faculty, staff, and administrators who exhibit resilience can develop innovative and responsive approaches to a college's needs. One of the best ways to do this is to use recruitment and screening processes to attract those who possess resilience, are self-reflective, and have the ability to accept and to implement constructive feedback (McArdle, 2014). Additionally, this learning culture provides development opportunities for current college personnel to become more resilient and to engage in personal and professional growth.

### Support From Leaders

This is hard work. Without support from above, intelligent failure is particularly challenging, especially in a college culture where the blame game is the norm. Often, attempts at innovation and improvement are thwarted by those who are so intent on defending their territories and processes that they fail to see opportunities. The status quo must be questioned and challenged, and this can only occur in a culture of inquiry supported by trust and strong relationships between various constituent groups (Miller, 2015). Moreover, leaders are essential in the work of failing forward, not because they must lead all initiatives, but because they facilitate the creation of environments in which support and trust are high and risks are acceptable means of generating innovations. In fact, it is often better to allow innovations to develop from the lowest possible level. For leaders in positions of authority, this means they can “let go of some control (not authority) in order to achieve creativity, collaboration, collective intelligence, and new pathways for action” (Klimek, Ritzenhein, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 48). Leaders also establish consequences for failure and accept a certain amount of risk in trying new ideas and approaches. Leaders can do this by encouraging intelligent and calculated risk-taking and celebrating both failures and successes by telling the stories about both—what positive things have been learned and why that is important.

### Assessment and Caveats

This article is not an argument for a free-for-all, try-any-crazy-idea milieu where accountability is nonexistent. Most community colleges are publicly supported institutions that must be responsible stewards of taxpayers' funds. We do not have license to create 20 million-dollar failures—though sometimes we do this anyway. Calculated risks can be assessed and appropriate adjustments made throughout the planning of an innovative idea or initiative. Before any initiative is developed, groups intentionally formed and comprised of individuals who think in diverse ways should engage in pre-assessment. This is where a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis is useful. Additionally, pre-assessments should involve a description of the current state of affairs of whatever the initiative is supposed to address. For example, if a plan for a new technical career program building is being developed, an assessment of the current facilities is in order. Formative assessments; small benchmarks, allowing for small failures rather than epic ones; and protocols for critique can assist the process along the way of implementation.

## Conclusion

A college that fosters intelligent failures holds its community members to high standards. Such an institution celebrates failures as well as successes on an ongoing basis and may even have a “wall of flops.” A culture of inquiry is nurtured, and faculty and staff move beyond defensive stances; their actions and interactions with others reflect flexible and open-to-change attitudes. College leaders allow for failures. They do not punish people for taking risks to help the institution, as long as their approaches are responsible and responsive. In other words, leaders collaborate to create a “mental space for inquiry, creativity, and reflection” (Kolb, 1984, p. 48). This environment values reasonable risk-taking, provides support when frustrations occur, and offers assurance that disappointments are opportunities for learning and are survivable (Macaux, 2012; Tuber, 2008). Leaders expect that people can do and are willing to do challenging work, and they support them in this work with resources, time, and professional development. Failing forward also requires us to tell the stories of our failures and to show others how we have learned and, ultimately, generated successful innovations as a result.

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