

Fail to avoid failure

"If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative." – Woody Allen



BY TIM EMPRINGHAM

I often get quizzical looks when I suggest that the adoption of a failure acceptance mindset in an organization or team is one of the most critical factors in the success of an organization.

I believe very strongly in the mantra put forward by design firm IDEO:

"Fail early and often to succeed sooner."

The key to failure acceptance though is that when I recommend "failing forward" I'm talking about the concept of "little f failure" as opposed to the type of failing that most people think about which I call "big F Failure." While both constitute a failure in the outcome in relation to the desired outcome, the biggest difference is the scale and timing.

"Big F Failure" are those notable and legendary failures where an individual, team or organization have made a plan, stuck to that plan, and then discovered at the end that the outcome was a long way from what was intended. Consider the launch of the Apple Newton or Microsoft Bob.

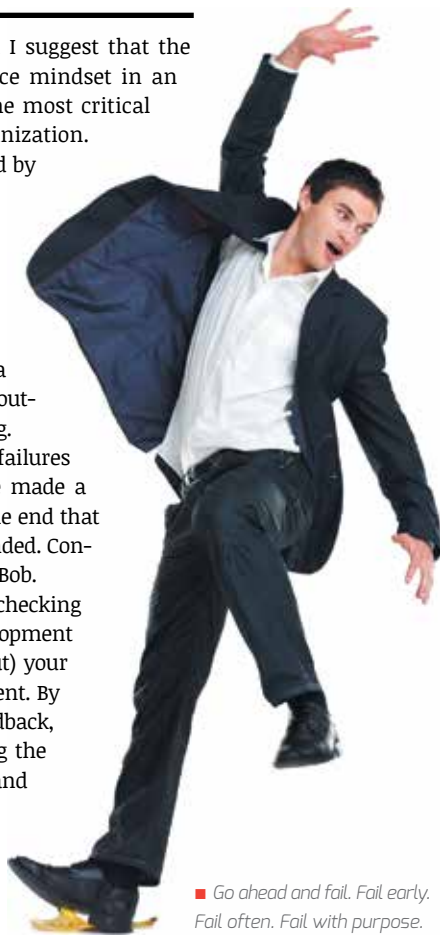
"Little f failure" is the practice of consciously checking the small outcomes throughout a project or development to gauge whether you need to adapt (or throw out) your plan based on what you are learning in the moment. By leveraging early and rapid prototyping, regular feedback, and a conscious approach to objectively assessing the little outcomes we allow ourselves to "fail" early and adapt, thereby averting what might have been a "Failure" if the plan was left alone.

This approach is actually consistent with the way our brains operate as we move around in our physical environment. The act of reaching out to pick up an object from a desk might appear to be a straight motion with your hand and arm, but in reality it is a rapid series of movements and course corrections that allows our hand to successfully arrive at the desired destination.

Implementing a "fail to avoid Failure" mindset has a dual benefit in an organization. First, it significantly reduces your chances of a really big Failure and all the associated wasted capital that comes with failure. Having the ability to fail and adjust mid-course or even kill a project that is destined for failure allows you to focus your finite resources on the things that will make you successful. Second, by allowing your team to take the little gambles you free them to find the new ideas that can turn into differentiators for your organization.

So go ahead and fail. Fail early. Fail often. Fail with purpose. And if you fail often rest assured that you will avoid failure and put yourself on the path to a level of success you have only dreamed of. **BL10**

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Fail often. Fail with purpose.

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