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Embracing Failure

Olivier Serrat
Asian Development Bank

Embracing Failure

Abstract

{Excerpt} Infinite complexity, endless possibilities, and resulting constant change characterize the 21st century. More intimately and faster than ever before, the realms of environment, economy, society, polity, and technology coevolve in adaptive systems. The times demand the ability to take risks, embrace failure, and move on.

Developing a culture of intelligent experimentation and failure analysis is no longer an option. Individuals, groups, and organizations must create, innovate, and reflect to generate the radical solutions they need to tackle challenges in markets, industries, organizations, geographies, intellectual disciplines, and generations. To accomplish this, they must learn to learn and learn to unlearn before, during, and after.

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Comments

Required Publisher's Statement

Embracing Failure

By Olivier Serrat

Success is a process and failure on the way is an opportunity. Successful individuals, groups, and organizations fail well.

Living on the Edge

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Learning from Children

Success and failure are borne of the same mother. Children are not afraid to fall short. They fail countless times at standing, walking, talking, riding a bicycle, tying shoelaces, and other important tasks. But they are resilient and never give up. They embrace failure and adapt until they achieve the desired result. Playing is a vital part of their lives.[2] It leads to making (constructing) in a social world that values participation and that leads to knowing. Is it because they no longer play that adults are afraid to fail? After all, is play not the opposite of work?

Allaying Adult Fears

Failure is something organizations shy away from. Instead of learning from failure in detail, adults profess they will never repeat that mistake again. Their fear is understandable: they are paid to succeed, not fail.[3] Hence, errors can only reflect negatively on their intelligence, chipping away at self-confidence and self-esteem. And so, despite the

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[1] For most of the 20th century, learning was about acquiring skills, usually through knowledge transfer. It was about learning to be. In a world of flux, it must develop as a theory of how one becomes time and again.

[2] Play provides the opportunity to experiment and fail—to fail yet continue to play with different outcomes. Playing is always about becoming, not being.

[3] It follows that compensation is based on tasks well done, not spectacular (and sometimes costly) failures that might eventually produce breakthroughs.

occasional exhortation inviting mistakes—"If you're not making mistakes, you're not trying hard enough"—personnel knows that mistakes are more often punished than rewarded. As a result, many are reluctant to admit inadequacies, weaknesses, mistakes, and their distinct needs (everyone has different talents and learning styles) and take as few chances as possible. This inhibits individual and collective growth and leads to paralysis, procrastination, and purposelessness.

Organizations cannot promote a passion for learning and pursue courses of action that frustrate it. In a learning culture or learning organization, failures are considered opportunities to learn, not recrimination—worse still in instances, point scoring. (To this effect, some draw learning charters.) If failure is branded as unacceptable, learning is made impossible—with the paradoxical result that failure will inevitably recur, if not prevail. The key to establishing learning systems is tolerance of failure, continuous feedback on effectiveness,[4] and willingness to foster creativity and innovation. Psychological safety, appreciation of differences, receptiveness to new ideas, and time for reflection are prerequisites to this.

The Attributes of Failure

If success and failure are relatives, failure is not inherently bad. Indeed, it has many advantages. Failure softens hearts, develops maturity, broadens thinking, offers insights, prompts innovation, reveals ability, inspires, reinforces the need for risk, builds courage, fortifies, opens other opportunities, brings unexpected benefits, pushes the envelope of future performance, liberates, makes success sweeter, and is preferable to bitterness and regret. However, to better grasp the attributes of failure and treat it as a friend, we should not define them (nor those of success) narrowly. Failure is best conceptualized as deviation from expected and desired results.[5]

Failing Well

Successful individuals, groups, and organizations fail much more than they succeed. However, their larger success derives from the fact that they fail well. The difference lies in their perception of and their response to failure.[6] In a word, they treat it as a process. They

- appreciate that failure is not avoidable, objective, a single event, a stigma, the enemy, or final;
- understand why they made the decision they took based on the information they had;
- assess their decisions based on what they knew at the time;
- judge the systemic errors they committed in under- or overestimating difficulties, costs, timelines, abilities, etc.;
- examine whether they had all the information they needed;

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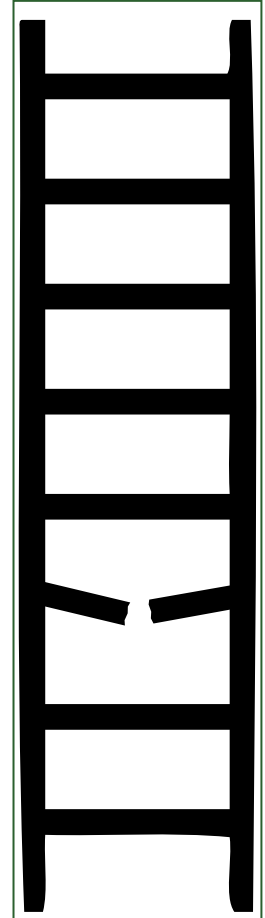
[4] Over the years, independent and self-evaluations have rightly found a role in discovering what results are being achieved, what improvements should be considered, and what is being learned. However, evaluation is still something of a niche occupation and the value it adds is conditioned by the objective specified. There are two competing, often mutually exclusive, purposes to evaluation. Evaluation for accountability centers on the past. Evaluation for learning seeks to improve future performance. Accordingly, there are differences in basic aim, emphasis, audiences, selection of topics, the status of evaluation, the status of evaluators, the significance of data from evaluations, and the importance ascribed to as well as the manner of feedback. What is more, even organizations that profess to evaluate for learning still lean heavily on evaluation for accountability in their methodologies and practices.

[5] This includes both avoidable errors and unavoidable negative outcomes of experimentation and risk taking. It also includes interpersonal failures arising from misunderstanding and conflict.

[6] Many individuals deemed highly successful, including some Nobel prize winners, set great store by their mistakes. This impacts every aspect of their lives. They appreciate that success is a process and that failure on the way is an opportunity. They concentrate on engaging, not just achieving. Struggles, periods of confusion, wrong turns, and dead ends are not cause for alarm; they are expected— indeed inevitable— parts of the journey. (Knowledge is much more than a stock. It is deeply contextual and sparked by circumstance. Hence, there is a natural flow to its creation, disruption, and use. The context can be simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic and related decisions must try to match the context's characteristics.) Highly successful individuals have a high tolerance for failure because they have developed the skill of learning to fail.

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- investigate what successes are contained in the failure and draw dividends;
- plan to obtain more and better information to underpin future decisions;
- use the experience to build and work from strengths; and
- set a new goal, order their plan, take action, reevaluate progress, and adjust continually.

Literature has not yet clearly described the process of learning from failure in organizations. (For individuals, it is in any event shaped by individual experience, knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors.)[7] Moreover, the significance of learning is not necessarily proportional to the scope of failure. Simply put, however, the process of embracing failure must involve identifying mishaps; discussing and analyzing them in a spirit of inquiry and openness; and dealing with controversy and disagreement productively. Needless to say, progress will hinge on the existence of shared, constructive beliefs, for instance, vis-à-vis performance outcomes. These will in turn depend on effective coaching and mentoring, clear direction, and a supportive and enabling workplace environment and culture.[8] The barriers to this lie at individual, group, and organizational levels.

> *I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.*
> —Steve Jobs

Embracing Failure

In the modern world, a mind shift we need is realization that failure is the rule rather than the exception. This begs intellectual honesty. Failure is a promising area of investigation because it is such a common experience. Yet, it is a secret that is never spoken out loud. One hundred years ago, Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), an Italian engineer, economist, sociologist, and philosopher, demanded: "Give me a fruitful error any time, full of seeds, bursting with its own corrections. You can keep your sterile truth for yourself." Failing well breeds success. It is not difficult to be definitely tentative, turn means into ends, be less prejudiced but more discriminatory, transform work into play, and celebrate mistakes. Why wait?

Box 1: Are You Ready To Embrace Failure?

1. Do you keep your mistakes to yourself?

2. Do you try new things only if you are sure you can succeed?

3. Do you become very cautious after something does not work out?

4. Do you try to immediately forget your failures?

5. Do you think failure is shameful?

If you have answered "Yes" to one or more of these questions, you are probably not ready to embrace failure. To successfully fail, you must take every aspect of failure to heart and learn from your mistakes to the full.

Source: Adapted from CNBC.com. 2008. *Quiz: Are You Ready To Embrace Failure?* 27 May. Available: www.cnbc.com/id/24846487

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[7] Stating the obvious, individuals display more differences in perception, sense making, estimation, and attribution than groups or organizations do.

[8] Next, tools and techniques can be applied to enhance recognition of the value of knowledge developed from experience and enrich sense making. They include action learning sets, after-action reviews and retrospects, the Five Whys technique, mind maps, the Most Significant Change technique, peer assists, the Reframing Matrix, the SCAMPER technique, the Six Thinking Hats technique, social network analysis, and storytelling, among others.

Box 2: Inspirations for Embracing Failure

Truth will sooner come out of error than from confusion.

—Francis Bacon

Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor.

—Truman Capote

'Tis the maddest trick a man can ever play in his whole life, to let his breath sneak out of his body without any more ado, and without so much as a rap o'er the pate, or a kick of the guts; to go out like the snuff of a farthing candle, and die merely of the mulligrubs, or the sullens.

—Miguel de Cervantes

Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.

—Winston Churchill

You will do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm.

—Colette

Mistakes are almost always of a sacred nature. Never try to correct them. On the contrary: rationalize them, understand them thoroughly. After that, it will be possible for you to sublimate them.

—Salvador Dali

Box 3: More Inspirations for Embracing Failure

I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.

—Thomas Edison

Even a mistake may turn out to be the one thing necessary to a worthwhile achievement.

—Henry Ford

A man's errors are his portals of discovery.

—James Joyce

Don't be afraid to make a mistake. But make sure you don't make the same mistake twice.

—Akio Morita

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows achievement and who at the worst if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Would you like me to give you a formula for... success? It's quite simple, really. Double your rate of failure. You're thinking of failure as the enemy of success. But it isn't at all... you can be discouraged by failure—or you can learn from it. So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because, remember that's where you'll find success. On the far side.

—Thomas J. Watson

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For further information

Contact Olivier Serrat, Head of the Knowledge Management Center, Regional and Sustainable Development Department, Asian Development Bank (oserrat@adb.org).

Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than $2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than $1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

   Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

Asian Development Bank
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines
Tel +63 2 632 4444
Fax +63 2 636 2444
knowledge@adb.org
www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions