How to be a Successful Failure
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How to be a successful failure

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Topics

• Failure and success
  • Complex relationship

• Defining “failure”
  • A taxonomy of failure

• Failure in business & projects
  • Hierarchies of failure

• Responding to failure
  • Strategy and tactics

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Is failure “A Bad Thing”?  

- **Failure** has many positive aspects  
  - Teaches us lessons  
  - Stops us going in the wrong direction  
  - Is part of striving for success  

- **Fear of failure** has many negative aspects  
  - Avoids learning opportunities  
  - Stops us from taking risks  
  - Makes us seek safety rather than opportunity  

Failure and Success (1)  

- **“Comfort Success Zone”**  
  - Within existing competence and capability  

- In the Comfort Success Zone (CSZ):  
  - Explore and exploit fully  
  - Push success to the point of failure, then go back one step (… or perhaps not … ?)  
  - Not failing = not trying hard enough  
  - Persistent success $\Rightarrow$ first failure  

- **Failure defines limits of success**
The Comfort Success Zone

In the Failure Zone (FZ):
- Reflect
  - Where are we now? How did we get here?
  - Should we go back? Can we?
- Learn
  - What caused this failure?
  - What should we do differently next time?
- Persist
  - What should we do now?
  - Don’t give up
Failure and Success (3)

- Leaving the Failure Zone
  - Check direction of travel
  - Find and test boundaries
  - Keep failing until you succeed
  - Persistent failure ⇒ new success [or defeat]

- Success follows limits of failure
  - Not succeeding = giving up too soon
Failure and Success (4)

- **Success follows limits of failure**
- **“Innovation Success Zone”**
  - Not the old CSZ
  - Outside existing competence and capability

- **In Innovation Success Zone (ISZ):**
  - Innovate(!): Do new things / Do things differently
  - Consolidate: New competence and capability
  - Create new CSZ

Failure and Success

A synthesis

Failure follows Success (limit of CSZ)
Success follows Failure (entry to ISZ)

Cyclic interdependent relationship
Defining “failure”

- Complex subject
- Many characteristics – not all negative
- Many dimensions
- Strong influence on attitude, behaviour & culture
  - Can inhibit innovation
  - Can cause ‘wrong’ lessons to be learned

Can we find a language that helps us deal with failure better?

Ten key characteristics

Failure is …
1. … natural
2. … universal
3. … inevitable
4. … pain
5. … opportunity
6. … learning
7. … information
8. … directional
9. … stimulation
10. … fun
Two types and seven dimensions

- Two main types of failure:
  - Absolute (0/1) vs Relative (below threshold)

- Seven different dimensions [at least]:
  1. Technical ("It doesn’t work")
  2. Competence ("I couldn’t do it")
  3. Commitment ("I didn’t try")
  4. Moral ("I cheated")
  5. Parameter ("OK except late/over-budget/too slow...")
  6. Hierarchical ("OK for you but not for me")
  7. Subjective ("I don’t like it")

Levels of failure in business

- Difference between:
  - Project management success/failure
    - defined by deliverables
  - Project success/failure
    - defined by benefits
  - Business success/failure
    - defined by value

- Hierarchical failure
  - Possible to fail at one level & succeed at another
Responding to failure

A strategy

- If failure is not “A Bad Thing”, how should we respond to it?
- An overall strategy: **RESILIENCE**
  - Personal
  - Project
  - Business
  - Society

**KOKO**

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Responding to failure

**Resilience**

- Definitions – Resilience is:
  - Capability to regain original shape after deformation
  - Capacity to maintain core purpose & integrity in face of dramatically changed circumstances
  - Bounce-back-ability

- Anti-definitions – Resilience is not:
  - Robustness
  - Redundancy
  - Recovery to initial state
Responding to failure
Enablers of resilience

- Personal
  - Inherent character
  - Practised emotional literacy
  - Exercise of will
- Project
  - Empowered team
  - Appropriate contingency
  - Flexible approach
- Business
  - Shared corporate culture
  - Robust processes
  - Grounded values
- Society
  - Strong identity
  - Shared values
  - Internal coherence across all levels

Responding to failure
Three tactics

- The “3M” approach
  [remember, it’s just a mnemonic!]
- M1: Mindset of failure
  - Expect and accept
  - Keep going but know when to quit (if unachievable or unaffordable)
- M2: Minimise occurrence of failure
  - Use proactive & effective risk management
  - Minimise threats, maximise opportunities
- M3: Maximise value of failure
  - Learn lessons from past failures
  - Make necessary changes to avoid future failure

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And finally …

- True failure is:
  - Not trying at all
  - Giving up too soon
  - Not learning or changing

Join the winners and become

A SUCCESSFUL FAILURE!!!
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About David Hillson

Dr David Hillson is The Risk Doctor. He is an international risk consultant, and Director of Risk Doctor & Partners. Many executives have benefited from his insights through personal coaching, and he has helped a wide range of organisations to manage their risk successfully at both strategic and tactical levels.

David has developed a number of innovations in risk management, which have been widely adopted. He is best known for championing the inclusion of opportunity in the risk process. He has also developed a scalable project risk methodology (see www.ATOM-risk.com) and a practical approach to managing risk attitudes (www.risk-attitude.com).

David’s risk work has been recognised with several awards, including “Risk Personality of the Year” in 2010. He received the PMI Fellow Award, the PMI PM Excellence Award and the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award from the Project Management Institute (PMI). He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) and a Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM). David was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) to contribute to its Risk Commission, and he is a Chartered Fellow with the Chartered Management Institute (CMI).

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