



Failure Is An Option!

In our culture, especially in government, the idea of failing in a project, service or other activity is anathema. In the “Land of Steady Habits”, failing as seen as the ultimate, well, failure.

In *How Google Works* and another book on a social media, *Things A Little Bird Told Me* (by **Biz Stone**, cofounder of Twitter), failure is seen as an important and even positive part of attempting anything worthwhile.

Believe it or not, both Google and Twitter have had much experience with failure – they have rolled out services that did not work or failed to keep their services from crashing when they were needed.

But, their culture (and resources) enables them to bounce back. We’ve all heard of Thomas Edison speaking about inventing the light bulb: “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

Here’s what I learned about Google’s culture regarding failure:

- In order to transform anything, “you must learn to fail well. Learn from your mistakes: Any failed project should yield valuable technical, user, and market insights that help inform the next effort.” [As Bill Gates has said, “It’s fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure.”]
- “Don’t stigmatize the team that failed”, others will watch “to see if the failed team is punished. Their failure shouldn’t be celebrated, but it is a badge of honor of sorts.”
- The role of management “is not to mitigate risks or prevent failures, but to create an environment resilient enough to take on those risks and tolerate the inevitable missteps.”

Biz Stone’s book plows some of the same ground. While discussing building a startup company, “in order to succeed spectacularly, you must be ready to fail spectacularly”. Failure, in terms of the many outages Twitter had, was “part of the path. It was worth the risk. In fact, it was a critical component of growth.”

Boards and Superintendents

For school boards and superintendents, it is hard to risk failure. Whether it’s a new curriculum pursuant to the Common Core, a new evaluation system or even changing the grade configurations across the district, missteps, whether in communicating with others, getting the support that you need or in how the new idea will work, is close to a probability.

Obviously, this must be considered before you launch the new idea. In order to succeed, you must risk unforeseen and even unforeseeable events.

This is not only applicable to the actions of the Board Leadership Team, it should be the perspective of the Team when considering the work of other members of the district staff. In order to succeed, especially in these times of rising expectations for all school systems, it is often necessary for teachers and principals to take some risks.

Not only will attempting new teaching methods or other innovative opportunities possibly lead to greater success for your students, it may very well energize your staff and help build morale.

Understand that failure will be a part of what occurs. Do not punish those who try, but fail, because other staff members will be watching.

Yes, districts are very different from startups. But how you handle failure will say a lot to your staff and your community about what you value.

Take measured risks, always explaining why you are doing so and you open up the possibility of great success.

And, unless you have to, don’t pull the plug too quickly on what appears to be failing.

As Edison said, “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”

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