FAIL BETTER

Design Smart Mistakes and Succeed Sooner

Anjali Sastry
Kara Penn

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about inspiration's overlooked but essential companion, the perspiration-soaked work needed to deliver on genius. No matter how great your ideas, in the end your impact will be measured by the effect you have on the world. Unless you're gambling on being incredibly lucky—a risky bet, we'd say—if you want your ideas to materialize, you need to be smart in your actions.

We're talking about bringing a new form of intelligence to your everyday efforts. You can't avoid missteps, of course. Yet there's scope for your mistakes to be *smarter.* With the right methods applied to their design, execution, and analysis, even the most unglamorous activities can yield new insights and fuel innovation. Workaday life may seem like an unlikely birthplace for brilliance, but it's where your ideas are hammered out, tested, and refined.

Join us, and you'll discover why we see great potential for you to remake your work practices so that you, your team, and your organization can do better. Your projects provide the sandbox for your actions. Using our method, you'll orchestrate your team's activities to enable smart mistakes and avoid uninstructive ones. You'll work your way toward impact, step-by-step. As you go, you'll be assembling the insight, knowledge, and evidence required for your ideas to succeed in practice. And as you learn to choose your path wisely and let go of false starts before they bog you down, you'll reach your goals sooner.

Don't get us wrong about the other stuff. We're all for inspiration—the cracking-the-puzzle, eureka-moment flash. Chances are, you've heard stories of brilliant discoveries that altered the course of history. But let's disentangle such tales from the realities on the ground. The truth is, that to make something excellent happen, there's work, more work, and then still more work. If you're fortunate, only *some* of it is inefficient.

We can't change the fact that innovation entails risk and that for anything novel or creative, you'll encounter failure en route to success. But because any movement from waste to value could pay off handsomely, we are looking to shift the balance of results toward the productive and away from the useless.

Our starting point is the idea that the right kind of failure—small-scale, reversible, informative, linked to broader goals, and designed to illuminate key issues—paves the way to success. The wrong kind entails waste, discouragement, rigid thinking, and reputational damage. For every potential good failure, the world presents us with many more ways to fail badly.

We know you can do better than simply accepting the hand you're dealt. You can benefit from failure by orchestrating the right kinds of actions, then figuring out what you have learned from every step, whether or not it is immediately seen as successful. To profit from both happenstance and planned failures, you need an effective method for extracting insights.

We mined our own experience to design and test the Fail Better approach.

About Us

Personal experience stands us in good stead as your guides: like you, we've encountered failure firsthand. As sometime change agents with an interest in social impact, we may have engaged in more