



Executive Book Summaries[®]

Right Kind of Wrong

The Science of Failing Well

by **Amy Edmondson**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

We used to think of failure as the opposite of success. Now, we're often torn between two "failing cultures": one that says to avoid failure at all costs, the other that says fail fast, fail often. The trouble is that both approaches lack the crucial distinctions to help us separate good failure from bad. As a result, we miss the opportunity to fail well.

After decades of award-winning research, Amy Edmondson is here to upend our understanding of failure and make it work for us. In *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*, Edmondson provides the framework to think, discuss, and practice failure wisely. Outlining three archetypes of failure—basic, complex, and intelligent—she showcases how to minimize unproductive failure while maximizing what we gain from flubs of all stripes. She illustrates how we and our organizations can embrace our human fallibility, learn exactly when failure is our friend, and prevent most of it when it is not. Edmondson gives us specifically tailored practices, skills, and mindsets to help us replace shame and blame with curiosity, vulnerability, and personal growth. You'll never look at failure the same way again.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The three reasons failing well is hard.
- Why you need awareness of context to fail well.
- How system awareness impacts unwanted failures.
- The keys to thriving as a fallible human being.

Part One: The Failure Landscape

Chasing the Right Kind of Wrong

In order to fail well, we have to learn how to chase the right kind of wrong. Failing well is hard for three reasons: aversion, confusion, and fear. Aversion refers to an instinctive emotional response to failure. Confusion arises when we lack access to a simple, practical framework for distinguishing failure types. Fear comes from the social stigma of failure.

Aversion: a spontaneous emotional response to failure

Failure is never fun, and nowhere is that more starkly true than in hospitals, where life and death are at stake. But even ordinary failures—our mistakes, the unimportant things we do wrong, the small defeats when we hoped for victory—can be surprisingly painful and difficult to come to terms with.

You trip on the sidewalk; a comment in a meeting falls flat; you're the last kid selected for an impromptu soccer game. Small failures, to be sure, but for many of us, the sting is sharp.

Aversion to failure is real. Rationally, we know that everyone makes mistakes; we know we live in a complex world where things will go wrong even when we do our best; we know we should forgive ourselves and others when we fall short. But failure and fault are inextricably linked in most households, organizations, and cultures.

Ironically, our aversion to failures makes experiencing them more likely. When we don't admit or point out small failures, we allow them to turn into larger ones. Our aversion to our failures also leaves us vulnerable to feelings of relief when someone else fails. We're instantly glad it's not us. Worse, we can be quick to judge others' failures.

It's human to feel anger and blame, but it's not a strategy for helping us avoid and learn from failure. One of the most important strategies for avoiding complex failures is emphasizing a preference for speaking up openly and quickly in your family, team, or organization. In other words, make it psychologically safe to be honest about a small thing before it snowballs into a larger failure.

Another strategy is how we frame our failures. Reframing a failure can give us joy instead of regret. How we frame or reframe failure has a great deal to do with our capacity to fail well. Reframing failure is the life-enhancing skill that helps us overcome our spontaneous aversion to failure.

Each of us is a fallible human being, living and working with other fallible human beings. Even if we work to overcome our aversion to failure, failing effectively isn't automatic. We also need help to reduce the confusion created by the glib talk about failure that is especially rampant in conversations about entrepreneurship.

Confusion: not all failure is alike!

Although "fail fast, fail often" has become a Silicon Valley mantra meant to celebrate failure, much of the discussion in books, articles, and podcasts is simple and superficial—more rhetoric than reality. For instance, it's clear that no company should celebrate a plant manager whose assembly line fails fast and often. Ditto for today's heart surgeons. No wonder we are confused!

Fortunately, this confusion can be reduced by understanding the three types of failure—basic, complex, and intelligent—and how differences in context matter. In some situations, well-developed knowledge about how to achieve desired results makes routines and plans generally unfold as expected; for example, following a recipe to bake a cake. These are called consistent contexts.

Other times, you're in brand new territory—forced to try things to see what works. These are novel contexts and include things like designing a new product.

Failures are more likely in novel than consistent contexts, so we don't get upset about them, right? Wrong. The small part of your brain responsible for activating a fight-or-flight response detects a threat no matter the context and our negative emotional reaction to failures, regardless of the level of real danger, can be surprisingly similar. But, a simple typology for distinguishing failures can help us make healthy attributions about them, counteracting this emotional hijacking.

In addition to novel and consistent contexts, all of us frequently find ourselves in variable contexts—those moments in life when knowledge exists to handle that particular type of situation, but life throws you a curveball. In our daily lives, we face situations where we have extensive prior knowledge but still face meaningful uncertainty.

The correlation between context type and failure type is substantial but they are not 100 percent aligned. A basic failure can happen in a laboratory when a scientist mistakenly uses the wrong chemical. Similarly, an intelligent failure can occur on an assembly line when a thoughtful process improvement

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suggestion turns out not to work as hoped. Nonetheless, an appreciation for the role of the context helps you anticipate the kinds of failures likely to happen.

Our confusion about failure gives rise to illogical policies and practices. The instinct to exhort people to do their best work in challenging times is understandable. It's tempting to believe that if we just hunker down, we can avoid failure all together. It's also wrong.

The relationship between effort and success is imperfect. The world around us changes constantly and keeps presenting us with new situations. Even when people work hard and are committed to doing the right thing, failure is always possible in a new situation.

Now consider what happens when executives, or parents, for that matter, state that failure is off-limits, that only good results are acceptable. Failures don't stop. They simply go underground. It's human nature to hide the truth when it's clear sharing it will bring punishment, or even just disapproval. Our fear of rejection presents the third barrier to practicing the science of failing well.

Interpersonal fear: stigma and social rejection

Adding to our emotional aversion and cognitive confusion is a deep-rooted fear of looking bad in the eyes of others. This is more than just a preference. The fear induced by the risk of social rejection can be traced back to our evolutionary heritage when rejection could literally mean the difference between staying alive or dying of starvation or exposure.

This survival mechanism in our brains that helped us survive in prehistoric times, today often leads us to overreact to harmless stimuli and to shy away from constructive risk-taking.

The fear response, designed to be protective, can be counterproductive in the modern world when it keeps us from taking the small interpersonal risks that are essential to speaking up or trying new things.

Psychological safety—an environment where you don't fear

rejection for being wrong—is the antidote to the interpersonal fear that prevents us from failing well. Psychological safety helps us to do and say the things that allow us to learn and make progress in our changing, uncertain world. It reduces the interpersonal barriers to failing well, so people can take on new challenges with less fear, such that we can try to succeed and walk away wiser when we don't. That is the right kind of wrong.

Failures may never be fun, but with practice using new tools and insights they can become less painful and easier to learn from. Failures are an unavoidable part of progress. This is true for our personal lives and for the vital institutions that shape society. This is why it's so important, and rewarding, to master the science of failure.

Part Two: Practicing the Science of Failing Well

We Have Met the Enemy

We go about our work and lives hampered by, and partly oblivious of, some well-documented human tendencies that make it difficult to learn the valuable lessons failures offer.

Part of the problem is that we are reluctant to share our failures with others—an old truth, today exacerbated by social media—and this reduces everyone's ability to learn from them. Important information is lost and we become doomed to repeat failures that could have been prevented.

For some, to begin learning from failure takes one large enough to be undeniable. We need to be hit over the head with our wrongness to make us stop in our tracks and start to wonder where we went wrong.

We don't all need a giant fiasco to change how we think to help us better navigate the inconvenience and embarrassment of ordinary, not-so-large failures in our day-to-day lives. We just have to learn a new way of thinking—one that favors learning over knowing.

Learning from failure is difficult for a host of reasons.

Sometimes we miss our failures, sometimes they threaten our self-esteem or don't seem to contain valuable information or we don't speak up about them. These largely cognitive barriers are exacerbated by the unpleasant emotions failure evokes, especially in how we measure up to others.

When we see failures as shameful, we try to hide them. We don't study them closely to learn from them. We can help ourselves learn from failure if we simply reframe a situation from "I was not promoted because I am a failure" to "I failed to get the promotion."

Our relationship to failure improves when we unlearn the belief that "I am a terrible person because I made that mistake" to understand instead that "I made a mistake" and to ask, "What can I take away from it that will help me avoid making the same one in the future?"

We need to choose learning over knowing. At the core of the reframing task lie the words we use to express our thoughts, privately and aloud. Am I failing, or am I discovering something new? Do I believe I should have done better—and I'm bad for not having done so—or do I accept what happened and learn as much as I can from it? Am I okay with the discomfort that comes with new experiences? Will I give myself permission to be human? Permission to learn?

We have met the enemy and he is us. Our distorted, unrealistic expectations for avoiding failures are indeed the culprit. Mastering the science of failing well must therefore start with looking at ourselves. Self-awareness is the first, and most vital, of the three competencies we need to develop.

Contexts and Consequences

An exercise called the Electric Maze designed more than three decades ago by inventor Boyd Watkins asks teams to successfully cross a rug that is rigged with beeping or non beeping squares without making any beeps.

The only way to find the right path is to step on squares, one at a time, through trial and error, to see if they beep. No one on the team has answers for this task so it can't be solved without experiencing failures (beeps) along the way.

Team performance is time based. Hesitating is costly. Yet, here's what happens. Each teammate seems to freeze because if they step on a beeping square, their team members groan. Or they step on a quiet square and everyone cheers. The team's reactions exacerbate the hesitation: the next person in the maze becomes even more hesitant, and eventually the team runs out of time.

When asked why they hesitated so much and ultimately failed the game, the answer is always the same. They didn't want to make a mistake and feel embarrassed. But stepping on a new beeping square is not a mistake. It's simply information about the path. It's the right kind of wrong.

When something goes wrong in unknown territory, it's a failure but not a mistake. Recall that something is only a mistake if you already have knowledge for how to avoid it. What people don't easily put into practice is that the way to perform well in the maze is to collect as quickly as possible information about which squares beep.

Logically, teams should applaud for discovering both quiet and beeping squares. Both provide vital new information about the path. Instead, people experience the tiny intelligent failure of a new beep as a mistake and feel embarrassed by it—an embarrassment amplified by others' reactions.

It shows lack of appreciation of context. When we face novel contexts in our lives, we must be prepared for failures as we navigate the new terrain. Most of us don't find ourselves standing in front of a literal maze trying to find the right path. But the exercise provides an apt metaphor for our lives.

All of us face uncertainty, which brings both risks and opportunities for discovery. All of us can benefit from pausing to consider the context at crucial and not-so-crucial moments in our day-to-day lives.

Too many failures in life, and in companies, occur because we don't pay attention to context. Practicing the science of failing well requires awareness of two dimensions of context: (1) how much is known and (2) what's at stake.

The first dimension concerns the degree of novelty and uncertainty. The second is about risk—physical, financial, reputational. Roughly speaking, are the stakes high or low? Reflecting on both the uncertainty and the stakes in a situation is a crucial competency for elite failure practitioners.

Situation awareness helps us feel better about experimenting when it's safe to do so and helps us be cautious when warranted to prevent unwanted failures.

Appreciating Systems

All of us operate in systems in our everyday lives—family systems, ecosystems, and school systems to name a few. This makes system awareness—especially how systems can

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produce unwanted failures—a crucial skill in the science of failing well.

A system's results are less shaped by its individual parts than by how the parts relate to one another. This simple but powerful idea can help you analyze and design various systems in your life to get better results.

The word system refers to a set of elements or parts that come together to form a meaningful whole—that is, a recognizable entity, whether a family, a company, a car, or a baseball team. Systems exhibit synergy: the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Put slightly differently, the behavior of the whole can't be predicted by the behavior of the parts examined separately. Only by considering the relationships between parts can you explain a system's behavior.

Most people's education doesn't prepare them to see systems. We learn to break down problems into parts, which enables focus and progress in many fields of knowledge but blinds us to larger patterns and relationships. Traditional management systems similarly break work down into parts, inhibiting collaboration and innovation in favor of reliability and efficiency.

Systems with interactive complexity and tight coupling are vulnerable to breakdowns. By taking time to consider how a system works, many complex failures can be avoided. Getting into the habit of looking for relationships between elements in a system allows us to anticipate and prevent all kinds of failures and breakdowns and, just as important, allows us to learn more from the failures that do occur.

Think about activities your children want to join. A simple yes today brings multiple consequences for others and for the future. A decision in one part of a family system at one moment often affects other parts and later times. The point is not to say no indiscriminately to any alteration in your family's activities.

Rather, it's to diagnose the most important interrelationships so as to say yes, or no, thoughtfully. What you want is

to benefit from the simple act of asking, (1) "Who and what else is affected by this?" and (2) "What might happen later, as a consequence of doing this now?"

Once you start seeing systems you can begin to see ways to alter the most important systems in your life or organization to reduce unwanted failures and to promote greater innovation, efficiency, safety, or other valued outcomes.

System awareness also helps you feel less bad about some of the things that go wrong in your work or personal life. When you start to see systems more clearly, you understand better that you are not wholly responsible for most of the failures that occur. You can feel responsible for your contributions to them—and determine to do better next time—but suffer less from the delusion that you're entirely to blame.

When you undertake systemic thinking it helps you make decisions more mindfully. This can seem distressing because there is no "right" answer. But it is also empowering because you get to choose! The choices you make can expand your opportunities for experimenting and learning.

Thriving as a Fallible Human Being

A certain freedom comes from learning to live comfortably with who you are. Fallibility is a part of who we are. Self-acceptance can be seen as brave. It takes courage to be honest with oneself, and it's a first step in being honest with others. Because failure is a fact of life, failing is not a matter of if but when and how.

But thriving as a fallible human being also means learning how to fail well: preventing basic failures as often as possible, anticipating complex ones so as to prevent or mitigate them, and cultivating the appetite for more frequent intelligent failures. Learning to recognize and learn from each of the three failure types and strengthen each of the three awareness zones is a lifelong process.

The most important reason to embrace our fallibility is that it frees us up to take more risks. When you take more risks, you will experience more, not less, failure. This is how you get more comfortable with it. But two good things happen.

One, you realize that you don't die of embarrassment. Two, you build muscle so that each next failure stings less. The more you experience failure, the more you realize you can still be okay. More than okay: you can thrive.

The science of failing well is not always fun. It brings good days and bad. It's practiced by fallible human beings working alone and together.

But one thing is certain. It will bring discovery.

Discoveries about what works and what doesn't work in achieving goals that matter to you, along with discoveries about yourself. Practice failing and you will develop the science of failing well.



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