Embracing Failure in Systems Change

FAILURE WILL HAPPEN

What is Failure? Failure is when we don't get the outcomes we expected. It doesn't necessarily mean a lack of success. Failure is also a disruption, an invitation to reorient our thinking, and a source of insight about what's really going on.

Why does it happen? We do systems change work in complex systems. Complex systems have adaptive and emergent properties that make it (nearly) impossible to predict the effects of our actions.

Systems Change work *always* involves failure.

**Cloud
(Complex)**

Unpredictable,
**hard to control,
endless and evolving**

"shiftable"

FAILURE IN THE CONTEXT OF COMPLEXITY

In the domain of complexity...
"…we can understand why things happen only in retrospect. Instructive patterns, however, can emerge if the leader conducts experiments that are safe to fail. That is why, instead of attempting to impose a course of action, leaders must patiently allow the path forward to reveal itself. They need to probe first, then sense, and then respond"

From "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making," David J. Snowden & Mary E. Boone, Harvard Business Review (Nov. 2007)

UNPRODUCTIVE FAILURE IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Sources:

- Holding a linear view of progress
- Lacking a systemic view and analysis
- Trying to protect our idealized view of ourselves or create 'perfect' solutions
- Under-capitalizing the effort
- Favoring positional power over shared ownership
- Embracing a goal that is too transactional to justify the effort
- Conversing in ways that are circular, polarizing and otherwise stuck
- Building a collaboration without enough difference or accountability
- Consistently prioritizing programmatic over systemic action

Effects:

- We pull back just when we're really starting to learn what will work
- We continue, over time, to employ transactional or superficial interventions
- We take failure personally instead of taking responsibility for our learning
- We get locked into habitual forms of action
- We fail to take risks commensurate with the challenge, sometimes out of fear of failure itself
- We allow failure to define the work
- We can start to blame others for something we had a hand in

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PRODUCTIVE FAILURE IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Mindsets & Practices:

- Have a powerful shared intent that will support people through the uncertainty and complexity
- Develop a systems and complexity view
- Stay in curiosity, vulnerability, and learning
- Ensure safe spaces for expressing concerns
- Solicit feedback from skeptics and those closest to the harm (HE)
- Do low-cost, low-fi prototyping first to fail early with lower costs and lower risks (RG)
- Test, learn, adapt…and repeat
- Put a version number on everything
- Go for good enough, not perfect (LJ)
- Create value as you go with minimum viable (or valuable) products
- Host "before action" and "after action" reviews
- Don't overlearn from failure

Results:

- We foster honest and open critique leading to more resilient interventions (HE)
- We understand the real dynamics of the system in deeper ways
- We gain more insight in what really needs to shift in the system
- We see needs or challenges that we couldn't have seen otherwise
- We can refine our design criteria so our solutions better fit the need
- We develop greater shared resolve, curiosity, and agility
- We foster deeper creativity
- We experience less painful and unproductive failure!

BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE LIES LEARNING & ADAPTING

FAILURE	LEARNING & ADAPTING	SUCCESS
We are blocked in our efforts and unable to continue at the depth or level needed for systemic change because of lack of engagement, lack of alignment, or lack of capacity.	We implement systemic interventions based on working hypotheses. Whatever results we get are feedback to help us adjust how what we're seeing or how we're making meaning of what we see.	The system is systematically producing healthy and equitable outcomes and people aren't forced to act heroically, working against the system, to get decent outcomes for themselves, their families, and their communities.
In either state, the system is still systematically producing unhealthy and inequitable outcomes, and people are forced to act heroically, working against the system, to get decent outcomes. This can look like failure even as we are learning and adapting our approaches.		

RESOURCES ON FAILING WELL

- Fail Forward, a "failure consultancy," supports people and organizations to fail intelligently. They have worked with the McConnell Foundation and Ontario Trillium Foundation, both of which support collaborative systems change approaches.
- Failconomy curates stories around failure and shares lessons learned.
- Example failure report from Engineers Without Borders Canada.
- "Strategies for Learning from Failure" (Amy C. Edmondson, Harvard Business Review, April 2011) differentiates types of failure and makes recommendations for building a learning culture.

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