

# FAILING PRODUCTIVELY IN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Key Mindsets and Practices



# LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We begin this webinar by acknowledging that we are meeting on Indigenous land. As settlers, we are grateful for the opportunity to meet and we thank all the generations of Indigenous peoples who have taken care of this land.

# TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- We've got you covered - You will receive a full recording of the webinar, the slides as well as a collection of links & resources.
- Join the conversation - Use the Q&A panel on your Zoom client to submit questions you'd like us to discuss.
- Technical Support - You can use the chat panel to ask for technical support throughout the webinar.



# GUEST SPEAKERS



**SONJA  
MIOKOVIC,**  
TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE



**RUSS  
GASKIN,**  
COCREATIVE



**LUZETTE  
JAIMES,**  
COCREATIVE



**HEATHER  
EQUINOSS,**  
COCREATIVE





CoCreative helps people who don't know each other and often don't even like each other solve systemic challenges and create better futures together.

We work across sectors and industries, in food, energy, finance, education, and health, leveraging the wisdom of diversity and the power of shared intent.

We do this by designing and supporting boundary-spanning systems change collaborations and supporting system leaders.

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THE ONLY THING WE HAVE TO  
FEAR IS AN UNHEALTHY  
RELATIONSHIP WITH FEAR.

Jennifer Hamady, The Art of Singing

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# SOMATIC EXPERIENCE: OPENING REFLECTION

We're going to invite you to reflect on an experience of failure and when we're done, we're going to ask you a few questions to respond to in Slido.

**TAMARACK**  
INSTITUTE

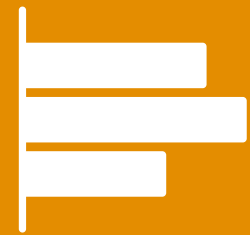


## REFLECTING ON AN EXPERIENCE OF FAILURE

- What was the context?
- What happened?
- What sensations do you experience in your body?
- What are you noticing?







SLIDO POLL

TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

AS YOU REFLECTED ON THAT  
EXPERIENCE OF FAILURE,  
WHAT DID YOU NOTICE IN  
YOUR BODY?

IN A PHRASE OR TWO, HOW  
DO YOU DEFINE 'FAILURE'?





**FAILURE WILL  
HAPPEN**



# WHAT IS FAILURE?

TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

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?

TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

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”



# 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



TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

WHAT STANDS  
OUT TO YOU?

# 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
- Do low-cost, low-fi prototyping first to fail early with lower costs and lower risks
- Test, learn, adapt...and repeat
- Put a version number on everything
- Go for good enough, not perfect
- 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
- 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!



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WHAT STANDS  
OUT TO YOU?

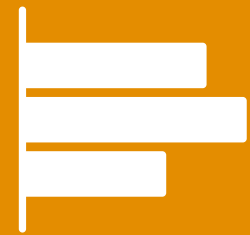


# POWER, PRIVILEGE & FAILURE

TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

Questions to consider:

- How does the cost of failure differ for different stakeholders?
- Who bears the greatest cost of failure?
- Who suffers the most over time if we don't risk ourselves in the work?
- Who's being set up to be the hero in the work (who then faces greater risk from failure)?



SLIDO POLL

TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

AS YOU REFLECT ON THE  
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER  
REGARDING POWER,  
PRIVILEGE, AND FAILURE,  
WHAT QUESTIONS MIGHT YOU  
ADD?



TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

QUESTIONS?



# SOMATIC EXPERIENCE: CLOSING REFLECTION

Return to that experience you reflected on at the beginning when you find yourself in the midst of failure.

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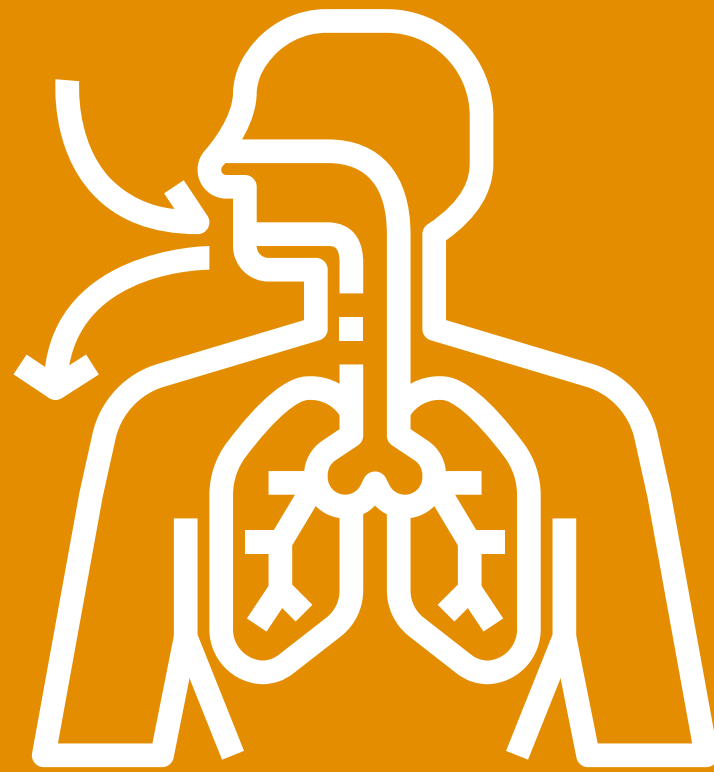
# PRACTICAL PRACTICES INCLUDE:

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- Changing your breathing pattern. There are many breathing techniques that calm our body. Intentional breathing inhaling through the nose for at least 3 seconds, bringing the oxygen all the way to our abdomen, exhaling deeply and for a bit longer than the exhalation. Breathing out fully all carbon dioxide. And repeat for a few counts.
- Take a walk in nature, slowly, contemplate the natural systems around. Move from your thinking monkey mind to your body
- A hand on the center of the chest and the other on your abdomen. Feel the warm of the hands.



# PRACTICES INCLUDE:



# RESOURCES ON PRODUCTIVE FAILURE

- 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.



TAMARACK  
INSTITUTE

THANK YOU

