



Failure is not a four-letter word:

Learning to embrace **failure** in our libraries.



Hello

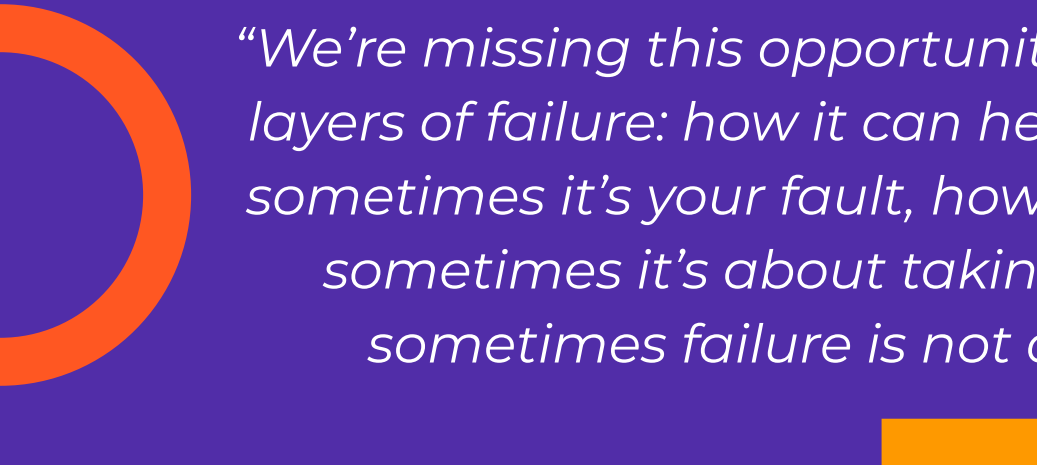


I am Dayna DeBenedet

I am the CEO of the Dryden Public Library,
a quilting fanatic, and a podcast enthusiast.
You can find me at @librarianishly.

Hi!





“We’re missing this opportunity to talk about all of the layers of failure: how it can help, how it can hurt, how sometimes it’s your fault, how sometimes it isn’t, how sometimes it’s about taking a big risk, and how sometimes failure is not doing anything all.”

Ilana Ben-Ari, 21 Toys

Ag en da

01

What is failure?

How do we understand failure in our libraries? What does it look like and how do we evaluate it?

02

Why does failure happen?

Why do programs, services and initiatives fail? How, and when, do we know that something is failing?

03

How should we deal with failure?

How do our systems respond to failure? What can we learn? What are the benefits and downsides of failure?

04

How can we cultivate failure as a skill?

How can we change our view of failure? How do we implement change? Can failure be a skill?



01

What is failure?

Thinking about failure in our libraries

- Do you talk about failure in your workplace? If so, how do you talk about it?
- Do you feel comfortable taking risks at work?
- Do you feel supported when you take risks?
- Do you feel supported when projects / programs / services you are involved in fail?
- How are we evaluating projects / programs / services in our libraries? Are we effective at measuring success and failure?



A watercolor painting of flowers in shades of pink, red, and yellow, with a paint palette and brush in the foreground. A purple circle with a blue horizontal bar is overlaid on the image.

What does **failure** look
like in our **libraries**?



What does **failure** look like in our libraries?



Low Numbers

Low statistics or attendance. Fewer attendees week over week.



Low Engagement

Low excitement or engagement. Does not engage patrons to accomplish its goal.



Lack of growth

Momentum is not building, program does not attract new patrons week over week.



Low return

Return on investment is low - cost of the program/service is too high vs. the use/engagement.



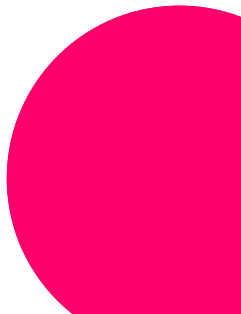
Poor policy

Gaps or inadequacies in policies that lead to a negative experience for patrons or staff. Policy is not in place to properly support initiatives.



Discontent

Patrons, staff or stakeholders are unhappy and/or disappointed.





Language



What type of language do we use?



Tone



What is our tone? Are we generally positive or negative?



Frequency



Do we talk openly and regularly about failure?



Company



Who do we talk about failure with? Colleagues? Friends? Family?



How do we talk about failure?



02

**Why does failure
happen?**

What are the factors that contribute to failure?



Internal Factors

- Organizational Failure
- Resource Failure
- Planning Failure

External Factors

- 
- Feedback Failure
 - Knowledge Failure
 - “Universe” Failure



Examining the **internal** factors.

Organizational Failure

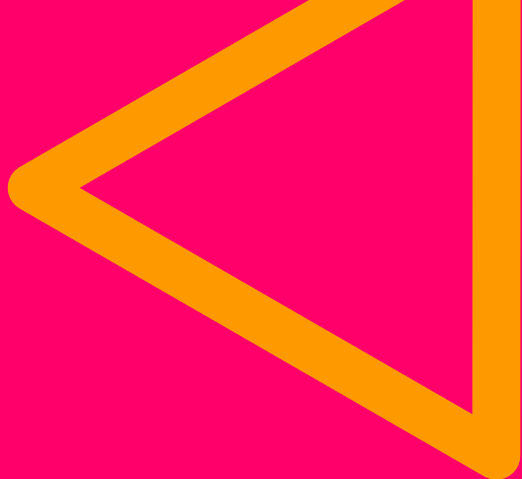
- Policy is not in place to support the initiative.
- Employees lack organizational support from management/board.
- Lack of buy-in
- Poorly managed change

Resource Failure

- Supplies or funding are not available.
- Inadequate space, staffing or time.
- Inadequate support for marketing, implementation etc.

Planning Failure

- Insufficient planning
- Rushing
- Planning did not account for , or overlooked, important factors.
- Disorganization
- Misunderstanding of audience.



Examining the **external** factors.

Feedback Failure

- Lack of interest from patrons/public despite adequate planning and marketing.
- “Missing the trend”
- Overcrowded market
- Competition with private business

Knowledge Failure

- Patrons or public don’t understand the initiative or lack understanding of the Library.
- Disconnect between what patrons want and our understanding of what they want.

“Universe” Failure

- Just because.
- “Blame it on the weather”
- Scheduling conflicts
- Unforeseen circumstances

When should you “kill” a **project**?

Some projects are amazing ideas, but due to a variety of internal and external factors they do not succeed.

When should we end a project or initiative?

- When there isn't enough interest
- When it no longer serves our goals or priorities
- When you are no longer motivated by it
- When the return on investment is too low



Evaluation



What are we measuring
when we evaluate our
programs and services?

Attendance

How many people attend. Door counts, participants, registrations etc.

Circulation

How many resources are being borrowed.

Satisfaction

Whether people “enjoyed” the program.

Impact

Whether the program fulfilled a need or met a stated goal.



Are we good at measuring
success and failure?



Do our
stakeholders
understand
our vision of
success?

Do our boards,
municipal councils,
community partners,
funders, etc.
understand our
strategic goals, mission
and vision?





X
03

**How should we
deal with
failure?**



Iterating



Refining ideas for continual improvement.



Drafting



Testing out an idea, while leaving room for development and change.



Practicing



Developing new skills and techniques, an ongoing process.



Learning



Gaining knowledge and understanding of our communities, staff and patrons.



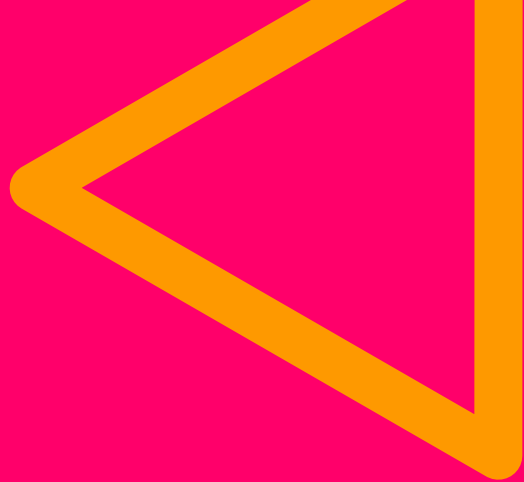
How should we talk about failure?

How do our **systems** respond to failure?

How we respond to challenges and failure at an organizational level determines how successful we will be at capitalizing on positive failure.

- Are we resilient?
- Are our libraries resilient?
- Do we have a Plan B?
- Do we take the time to learn from failure or do we try to hide it away?





What are the **downsides** of **failure?**

Resource Loss

- Loss of time, money or supplies.
- Strain on budgets
- Complicated reporting on funding (if tied to grant etc.)

Morale

- Negative responses from staff or patrons.
- Increased stress on employees.
- Employees feel unsupported and/or disengaged from their work

Perception

- Negative perception from stakeholders, including management, board, council, funders etc.
- Fear of, or actual, negative response from the public.
- Public backlash.



What are the **benefits** of **failure**?



Creativity

Finding solutions to problems activates creativity.



Innovation

No one ever came up with a great new idea without coming up with a few bad new ideas. Failure is essential to innovation.



Resilience

Failure teaches us how to learn from our mistakes and keep going, it builds stronger staff and libraries.



Skill building

Dealing with failure helps identify gaps in skills and training. Learning from failure also helps us develop new skills and put them in to practice.



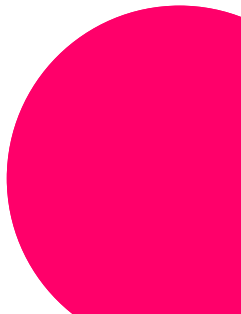
Growth

Failure helps to grow new ideas. The process of iterating and drafting helps us hone in on ideas and develop new ways of solving problems.



Understanding

Failure can help us better understand our patrons, staff and community. Learning where we missed the mark helps us understand how to meet our patrons needs next time.



“Failure should be our teacher, not
our undertaker.”

Denis Waitley





04

**How can we
cultivate failure
as a skill?**

Cultivating **failure** as a **skill**

How can we
learn to fail
well?





“We need to start teaching failure education, not only because it’s part of being human, but because we all respond to disappointment, risk, opportunities, and challenges differently. Once we better understand how we respond to failure, how our colleagues respond to failure, and how our systems respond to failure, then we will be better equipped to deal with failure. Instead of fearing it, we will start designing for and around it.”

Ilana Ben-Ari, 21 Toys

Embracing **positive failure** at work.

We can be intentional about the way we treat failure in our workplaces - creating space and opportunities for **positive failure**.

Positive failure is:

- Failure that results in learning and growth
- Failure that leads to a deeper understanding of a problem
- Failure that results in creativity and problem-solving
- Failure that is a step toward something rather than an end.



Embracing **positive failure** at work.

Some strategies for cultivating positive failure include:

- Teaching people how to fail
 - 21 Toys/Failure Toy
 - Prototyping
- Ensuring that your organization values the things that failure can teach us
 - Resilience
 - Creativity
 - Community
- Making space to reflect on failure and setting a positive tone
 - Dismiss the fear of failure
 - Intentional language and tone
- Evaluate your evaluation process.
- Bring the “Maker” ethos out of the maker space and into the whole library.



Managing **fear** to empower **innovation**

- **Managing change is one of the most difficult aspects of any role.**
- **Managing change in libraries means taking a holistic approach in evaluating how the change will impact employees, patrons, stakeholders and public perception.**
- **Why is change so scary?**
 - Unknown impacts
 - Personal fears or experiences
 - Fear of failing at something new
 - Leaving the comfortable behind
 - Overwhelmed by new roles or expectations
 - Lack of support, knowledge or understanding



The bigger the **innovation** the
bigger the **risk**.



Risk and Innovation



How can we minimize the fear of taking risks?

Goal Setting

Make sure the goals and vision for a project are clear before you begin.

Support

Make sure that the proper support system and resources are in place.

Open Communication

Talk. Talk. Talk.

Failure

Anticipate mistakes, missteps and failures, and approach them with positivity.

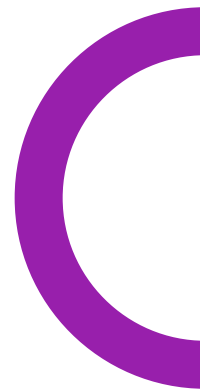
The background is a vibrant, abstract painting with thick, textured brushstrokes in shades of red, orange, yellow, blue, and purple. A large, solid purple circle is centered on the page, containing white text. Below the text is a horizontal light blue bar.

Failure is **normal**,
healthy and
important.



We are all
failures - at least
the best of us
are”

—J.M. Barrie
author of Peter Pan





Thanks!

Does anyone have any questions?

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