

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

## **There Are Three Types of Failure, but Only One You Should Actually Feel Bad About**

Source: Leah Fessler, QZ.com, August 23, 2018

Failing sucks. Whether it's your first or fiftieth time bombing a presentation, messing up a calculation, or bumbling through an interview, the sting of rejection never quite wears off. And while Silicon Valley gurus preach the importance of "failing fast" (failure, supposedly, being the key to success), it's easy to take real-life, everyday failures personally. When we screw something up, most of us blame ourselves, feel terrible, then resort to deflection: "It's not *me*, it's them," we think.

This cycle isn't just exhausting, it's useless. Failure presents invaluable learning and growth opportunities, which is why the tech world finds the concept so buzzworthy. But to extract such learnings, we need to analyze not only the failed result, but also the failure *itself*.

This is the step most people skip, according to Amy Edmondson, a leadership and management professor at Harvard Business School. The key to effectively analyzing our failures, she says, is realizing that not all failures are the same. Per her research, there are three distinct types of failure—some of which should rightly spark self-questioning or embarrassment, and some of which should not.

### **Preventable failures**

The first and most obvious type of failure is the "preventable failure," which is essentially what it sounds like: a failure that you had the knowledge and ability to prevent.

Most failures in this category can indeed be considered "bad," says Edmondson. She writes in *Harvard Business Review*:

"They usually involve deviations from spec in the closely defined processes of high-volume or routine operations in manufacturing and services. With proper training and support, employees can follow those processes consistently. When they don't, deviance, inattention, or lack of ability is usually the reason. But in such cases, the causes can be readily identified and solutions developed."

Outside the professional realm, a preventable failure may be getting a bad grade on a test for which you didn't study, even though you understood the subject matter. Or angering your roommate by not cleaning the bathroom sink, even though it was your responsibility to do so. Feeling bad about yourself after such a failure is reasonable, and often necessary, because the error is usually the result of laziness, entitlement, or a reluctance to follow instructions.

To minimize preventable failures, especially at work, Edmondson suggests creating process-oriented checklists, a strategy Harvard surgeon Atul Gawande unpacks in his bestselling book, *The Checklist Manifesto*. Another solution is the vaunted Toyota Production System, which encourages continual learning from tiny failures.

### **Complex failures**

As its name suggests, complex failures are the more-complicated cousin of preventable failures. These failures have high potential to promote learning in workplaces, as Edmondson recently explained in the *New York Times*:

"Complex failures occur when we have good knowledge about what needs to be done. We have processes and protocols, but a combination of internal and external factors come

together in a way to produce a failure outcome. These kinds of failures happen all the time in hospital care, for example, where there's enough volatility or complexity in the environment that things just happen."

Complex failures can also be understood as unavoidable failures, which makes it difficult to assign responsibility for them, says Edmondson. They can happen when a particular combination of needs, people, and problems occurs that's never occurred before. Much like triaging patients in a hospital emergency room or responding to enemies on a battlefield, running a fast-growing startup can produce many unpredictable situations.

Edmondson writes that it's counterproductive to consider this type of failure "bad," because noticing small failures of this type is what prevents future mistakes.

### **Intellectual failures**

The third, and juiciest form of failure, in terms of learning potential, is intellectual failure. This is the type of failure Silicon Valley entrepreneurs talk about when they promote "failing fast" or "failing forward." Intellectual failures occur when experimentation is necessary, "when answers are not knowable in advance because this exact situation hasn't been encountered before and perhaps never will be again," writes Edmondson in HBR. Often, these failures occur when we're working in areas in which we lack expertise, or in areas that are uncharted in a broad, industrywide sense.

For example, an intellectual failure has occurred when you launch a new product that's never been launched before, and it fails. Or if you're discovering new drugs, creating radically new businesses, or testing customer reactions to a new product, and the experimentation doesn't go well. In these circumstances, you should tell *everybody* about your failure, says Edmondson. If we don't discuss intelligent failures, it's likely that other people will repeat the exact same mistakes, which makes organizations, and individuals, increasingly inefficient over time. Edmondson writes in HBR:

"Failures in this category can rightly be considered 'good,' because they provide valuable new knowledge that can help an organization leap ahead of the competition and ensure its future growth. 'Trial and error' is a common term for the kind of experimentation needed in [settings that may inspire intellectual failures], but it is a misnomer, because 'error' implies that there was a 'right' outcome in the first place. At the frontier, the right kind of experimentation produces good failures quickly. Managers who practice it can avoid the *unintelligent* failure of conducting experiments at a larger scale than necessary."

Ultimately, all failure should be contemplated, not ignored. And while feeling bad about yourself is sometimes warranted, it should never be permanent. More often than not, failure is a way to learn something you didn't know before—and as the greats always say, knowledge is power.

### **Possible Response Questions:**

- What are your thoughts on the value of failure?
- Reflect on a particular failure of yours and what you learned from it.
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.