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It's OK to Fail, but You Have to Do It Right

By Linda A. Hill

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Summary. Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson is probably best known for her research and pedagogical work in the workplace. She has written three books, including the forthcoming *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well and why it matters*. **more**

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When you or your team (or my team) do things — and not all of them succeed — that's called experimentation. Learning from experiment is essential for your company's growth. On the other hand, when you deviate from standard operating procedure, that's called deviance. Learning from deviance is critical to know the difference, and to create a workplace where individuals feel psychologically safe to raise smart critiques.

For this episode of our video series "The New World of Work", HBR editor in chief Adi Ignatius sat down with Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, an expert in psychological safety and author of the upcoming book *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*, to discuss:

- Production, intelligent mess to hit
- Dangers of an experimenting enough
- Balancing individual employees' needs with those of the team and organization

Edmondson says that leaders should do a thorough post-mortem after every failure, whether it was production or not, to ensure that it does not repeat itself. "I believe, even on intelligent failure, in new territory, new discovery, is no longer intelligent the second time it happens."

"The New World of Work" explores how top-tier companies view the future and how their companies are trying to set themselves up for success. Each week, Ignatius talks to a top leader on LinkedIn Live — previous interviews included Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt. Ignatius also moderates panels at HBR conferences — and solicits questions for future discussions — in a newsletter (see its HBR subscribers). If you're a subscriber, you can sign up here.

ADI IGNATIUS:

Amy, welcome to The New World of Work.

AMY EDMONDSON:

Great to be here. Adi. Thanks for having me.

ADI IGNATIUS:

You book is primarily about failure. I was under the impression that we all understand that failure is noble and not shameful, and provides useful learning lessons. But you're writing a book that seems to be saying that we need to think hard and consider differently about failure. What are you trying to accomplish with this book?

AMY EDMONDSON:

I was with you and where I joined around and realized that the truth is many people were still confused about failure. There is a lot of happy talk about failure out there. There's the virtual mantra of Silicon Valley to fail fast, fail often, failure's good. Let's learn from failure, let's have a failure party. And I realized that people were still very, very confused. The data I'm with with my colleague Amy Wrzesniewski. We can't tease what is, even if we wanted to, we have to work with it.

But I think no one can really take to heart the happy talk about failure because it's so confusing. And I realized that I'd been part of the campaign that Silicon Valley had that, but often camp. And then the other camp, which is, "I love to the real world, failure's not an option." And they're both right or they're both partially right, but neither is terribly helpful our current specific.

So I think the happy talk, when it's not qualified with a coherent way of making distinctions between the good kind of failure and the not so good kind, is possibly more destructive than helpful. It drives the human conversation underground. It's important to talk about the kinds of failures for which we really should be celebrating it with open arms and the kinds where we maybe shouldn.

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ADI IGNATIUS:

Then, of all, it's not how most incentives are set up. I'm not saying everybody's, but most incentives are set up to punish people for mistakes in organizations, and people would rather do something that fail.

And you're right, maybe a better way to talk about this is not as failure, but as experimentation. You have to be very pro-experimentation. But we live in a world of incentives. And I think most failures are the result of some experiment.

Smart experiments are ones that happen in new territory — historically, if you can look up the answer, find the recipe, find the blueprint, please don't experiment. But if you're in new territory and you're in a place consistent with the value proposition of the organization, with a hypothesis you've done your homework on and importantly, as small as possible.

These are the kinds of both experiments and failures we want welcome with open arms. They are discoveries and they allow us to figure out quickly what is not, what. Are a portion of the book is devoted to best practices for failure proofing that which can be failure proofed. The activities, the operations in your company that are in known territory, are ones that should be well on go to make failure extremely rare.

ADI IGNATIUS:

Are these mistakes that do not tolerate failure? Airline pilots? Don't I don't want airline pilots to be experimenting. Or I don't want in industries that really don't tolerate failure? And you can look at them and say, "You actually can get interesting results if you have that kind of policy?"

AMY EDMONDSON:

Let's start with airlines because clearly none of us want them to be comfortable with failure. So I think the reason why airlines have an extraordinary record of success and safety is because they're telling and training their people to be very, very, very, very, very, very attentive to the situation. There's training, there's a lot of emphasis on speaking up early to prevent something worse from happening. So safety record does can come from being conscious of failure, but rather being intolerant of major accidents.

Therefore, we have to be very conscious of the reality of human error or that we can catch and correct, we can train, we can allow people to take the kinds of risks and experiments we want but taking place in safe settings like the simulator, not in the execution of the real deals.

But I don't think it's possible to describe industries in this or any question implies. I think there's variation across companies. Pick an industry like but owning consumer goods. It's going to be not that hard to find differences in cultural behavior tolerance within those industries that are very important. Some companies are doing better than others. Some companies are doing better than others in having a healthy tolerance of intelligent failure.

ADI IGNATIUS:

What does a productive failure look like? You did mention that there are good and bad failures. What's the difference and how does one try to make sure that failures are the good kind?

AMY EDMONDSON:

In known territory where we have a process or a formula for getting the result we want, it's best practice to use that process, use that formula and get the result we want. So when a Lithium employee a number of years ago discovered that a process that was being followed was costing $800 million in a client that he doesn't have, that was a clear, unproductive failure. Time one they went out even ahead to get the money back. So, not embracing that kind of failure.

A productive failure is one where we get new and useful knowledge, new knowledge that helps us go forward in creating the kind of new territory to come in our market, for our customers. So we discovered something that we could not have discovered without trying it without the experiment.

ADI IGNATIUS:

Would you recommend that there be an elaborate postmortem? I think the military is very focused on doing detailed postmortems. What should a company do, what's reasonable to learn from that and not have it happen again.

AMY EDMONDSON:

It is not the case that a postmortem has to take inordinate amounts of time. Yes it should be thorough, it should be analytical, and look carefully at the different facets of the failure, to understand accurately what happened and why. But the express purpose of preventing that from happen from happening ever again. So, failure, even an intelligent failure, is a gift. We've made a new discovery, so we longer intelligent the second time it happens.

ADI IGNATIUS:

I want to shift gears a little bit to talk more generally about the workplace. The question really is: Are we ready? I'm reading a recent piece in Harvard Business Review that suggested maybe things are not as bad as people think in terms of the mental health of people in the workplace. However, We are speaking to a moment in which we have, in the accounts I've heard in particular, but you know, we suffering! And if so, how do we respond to that as managers?

AMY EDMONDSON:

Well, I don't have a kind of systematic worldwide dataset from which I can make solid inferences about how people are doing. My impressions comes from informal conversations, qualitative research, reading HBR and many other outlets, to see how people are doing. It is very, it feels. I'm commenting on the conversations in HBR and in many other business media outlets, maybe Linkedin and elsewhere.

One thing I think I can say for sure is that the anxiety is real, and people are very anxious about their jobs. They're worried about their jobs. They're worried about their careers. They're worried about their lives. They're worried about business, so I can understand. I'm very sympathetic to that.

But that anxiety tends to push us toward a retreat or our individual corner, and people want to hide. That's getting in the way. They've been more focused on their own wellbeing than on the health of the team or health of the organization. And that gives rise to a suspicion for erosion, even vicious cycle, where organizations find themselves in the top of responding to requests and issues to initiative, one by one.

We need a new holistic way of thinking about it. And I see limited evidence of companies being at least described in passing to think about the larger picture, their productive purpose, what it implies for how we work together and what it implies for our relationships. And I have to suppose that work, with all its variety and variable needs, is a thoughtful way, and how to inspire and motivate people to do it well.

Let me just briefly go to the human issue, because there actually has been research that shows that people who are more, more, more inclined to feel human is automatically higher when psychological safety is known. Right? For instance, it seems to me that some portion of the burnout is associated with loneliness and isolation. I think it's fair to say that we can endure many challenges when we feel genuinely that we're in it together and that we have a supportive manager with our colleagues to mitigate some of our larger chaos challenges.

ADI IGNATIUS:

One can't help but think, "Okay, is some of this related to the pandemic?" Which for many of us, broke up teams, created new work environments with work from home, that in many ways is fantastic for people who are balancing their work and life. It must not be all, or maybe the teaming imperative that you've written about. Is that your launch?

AMY EDMONDSON:

I tie to think the pandemic took a toll on us, on all of us. It turned much so, many people's lives upside down. Fortunately, I'm working on a book on general skills that we normally need to, it was a very abrupt shift, and it gave rise to wonderful — and I think productive — experiences on different work arrangements.

Now it's time for a very systematic assessment of what's working and what isn't and it can be incremental, right? And it also can be based on what people say they want. Because oftentimes, what we say we want is not actually what we need or truly want for the longer-term, bigger picture, to get where we need and want to go.

ADI IGNATIUS:

You talked a second ago about trying to have a comprehensive policy and approach to that, if I heard you right, in not dealing with people always individually. But I think that's a very important consideration. Leaders, managers are expected to be, in addition to everything else, almost like psychiatrists, that there's an expectation for people to share their personal situations, challenges, problems, and that's a big role of the manager, increasingly. I struggle with that in an intelligent way. So how do you think about that? Is that a reasonable expectation? I don't think anyone you're already on is the side to be, which is losing the sense of the teaming and the collective effort.

AMY EDMONDSON:

It's almost as if we're four eight of tensions and trade offs. There will always be a tension between me and the second, right? There will always be a tension between my desires in the moment and my aspirations over the long term. If we ask me what I want, you are inclinedly and that I ask you what I want, I'm inclinedly and that's fine. But that's not, that's not what you want to know? I mean, really and truly, and what we go, I want to make a difference.

I think we're in a moment of our history, perhaps not just in education, but in many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many, many, we want to answer. We want to mature collectively. We want to mature in some ways that I larger than ourselves and our bedroomie desires.

You can think of, we did Hollywood management theory of the film, Jerry Maguire, and the famous line, "Show me the money." And that's a construction-long tasks, and it would be efficient, it would be sensible, it would be logical. But it doesn't work, because a lot of the work we have to do is inherently collaborative, and dynamically so. And I will jointly parcelled out, dividing and conquering work. It requires us to really work together and coordinate our efforts, and that's, that's, that's, that's engaging, rewarding, satisfying experience. The hard notes, it is not easy to manage.

But I think we can give them which kids of such pieces have to be managed differently, such pieces, you're almost a psychiatrist or that person, versus let's step back and rethink, how do we design our activities, our operations, so that we create the most value for those we serve?

ADI IGNATIUS:

Yeah, I love that, and I have to say that I didn't think companies have figured that out yet. The disruption of Covid opened our eyes to some flexibility. But I think the things you're pointing out Paper, as, we're still struggling with that. And I think a lot of harvard I am and need to keep experimenting.

So we're in the age of anxiety, where there's burnout. And then, you throw on top of that pressures 10, and then — possibly increased, possibly not — that generation Q will be able to do all of our jobs or almost so on. I assume you haven't done quantitative research, but qualitatively, what's your advice for people as generation X's seniors the workforce at every level and the possibilities because chaos and tension?

AMY EDMONDSON:

As you indicated, it's a little crazy-making very wholesome, except for the effects on people and culture. A great from the perspective of someone forming at the magazine to the many conversations in work and social gatherings either, and I think you're right. I think that is the dominant emotion, that certainly issues are excited, some are super optimistic about what's coming changes to come, but I think clearly there must be fear tensions.

The crack to we need both. We need some positive, thoughtful, disciplined optimism and experience and figure out what's going to work. But we need to be open to that to single solutions is the dramatic shutting of what's possible.

ADI IGNATIUS:

Here's a question from Diane from Hawaiian Memory. Mistakes kind of metrics can be used to measure smart failures?

AMY EDMONDSON:

My first response is that it's a good idea to have metrics. One of the things that I've spent the most time studying is how many failures don't even get the chance to be measured, because people don't speak up about them. This was how I got into the topic of failure. I was in the discovery of dynamic differences across groups, even within the same organization, in the extent to which people speak up about things that strong yellow lines that things that go right.

Here's the challenge more broadly than just people not necessarily speaking up the category of intelligent failure covers true territory. I mean, I mean, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry

But I think it's helpful for leaders, and others for that matter, to talk about the reality that we will make mistakes because we're human. The very best practice is not to never make a mistake. It's to catch and correct them quickly, and then also to make that distinction between smart experiments in new territory that we also want to see more of because it's the secret to future value creation. And we welcome those, too.

ADI IGNATIUS:

Furthering that, here's a question from Benny from California. What's the best way to speak to subordinates after a failure to boost morale and communicate that, "This was a good failure. It's OK"?

AMY EDMONDSON:

I'm going to say "honestly." You can be honest about, "Wow, this was disappointing for all of us, and let's get everything we can out of it. Let's learn as much as possible." And in fact, given that something substantial that goes wrong nearly always has multifaceted aspects to it, it's helpful to have a thoughtful and data-driven conversation about what happened. Not "Who did it?", but, "What happened?"

We may go around the team and ask, "What did you see?" And we're really looking for what happened, what contributed to that, and that's both commission and omission, things that you did that may have contributed, things that you didn't do that may have helped. It's a thoughtful, deliberately learning-oriented conversation designed to help us be better next time.

ADI IGNATIUS:

How do you reenergize your team these days? How do we reenergize our team particularly now, in 2023, where it feels like there's a lot of stuff swirling around?

AMY EDMONDSON:

It starts with personally taking the time to reconnect with your own sense of purpose for doing the job, the role that you are currently doing. And consider why it matters to you and why what you are doing or leading matters to the world.

Having done that, share it. Share it often and then just as quickly invite others in to help navigate the necessarily stormy waters that lie ahead. I think it starts with you and then it's an honest sharing of why you care, why it's challenging, why you very much need and are interdependent with others. Because all of us want to be needed. We want to be needed. We want to matter.

ADI IGNATIUS:

The last few years, with the pandemic, I'd say certainly in the U.S., there's been increased attention to social issues, which on the one hand I think felt right to people in the workplace. On the other, it brought more challenges into the workplace. One imagines there's a pendulum, and it might swing between leadership needing to be very empathetic to, I don't know, the backlash if that's the right word. Leaders need to achieve productivity. That's what it's all about. Do you believe in that pendulum or are we in a different place? And if you do, where are we right now on that swing?

AMY EDMONDSON:

I believe in the pendulum. I believe that the pendulum happens and I believe there may be a better way. It's often thought of as empathy versus productivity. And I looked this up actually: Productivity is defined as the effectiveness of productive effort as measured in terms of the rate of output per unit of input.

The first problem is that not all work is easily measured for productivity. The second problem is, often it's not the right way to measure excellence. Productivity is often a short-term measure, and it has limited predictive value for the future performance of the firm. For example, one way to be really productive is to just push people to their limits. But that has time constraints. Eventually they will burn out, leave, etc. It's like Buckminster Fuller used to say that it was foolish to burn down the house to keep warm on a cold winter's night. The excessive pressure can be the equivalent of that error.

And also innovation work in particular, we have case study after case study where the work actually suffers when productivity metrics are brought to bear.

In a way, I wish the pendulum were more about excellence than productivity, because I think productivity is really tricky and variable to measure.

I see the pendulum existing, but maybe it's a false dichotomy. Maybe it's not empathy versus productivity. Maybe we need smart, caring leaders who understand the importance of both. And given that that's very challenging, they're open about it being challenging. They're asking for help. They're sharing the burden of caring and excellence with their teams and considering, again, the fundamentals of what it is the organization must do well to stay alive in its market, to perform in its market. And talk about it honestly.

I sometimes think we don't talk often enough about the fact that work is work. It's supposed to be a little bit of work, but that doesn't mean it can't be fun, energizing, collaborative, and full of empathy.

ADI IGNATIUS:

I love that. Well, that's a good point to end on. Amy Edmondson, thank you for being on the show.

AMY EDMONDSON:

Thanks for having me. All the best.

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