

FAILURE

2016 TABLE HOTSPOT RESOURCE: HOW TO LEARN FROM FAILURE WITHOUT HANGING OURSELVES – OR GRANTEES – OUT TO DRY



Grantmakers can approach how they learn from failure from a number of perspectives. Some of these methods might be challenging for funders, or could present them with truths they aren't entirely comfortable facing.

- As well as discussing learning from failure, Table Hotspot participants looked at dealing with the media, reducing risk, and properly defining “failure” and “success”.

“Part of being a learning organisation is allowing failure.”

“Owning failure rather than hiding it will make it easier to learn and move on from it.”

“Organisational culture can determine how you share lessons from failure, with whom you share them, and how much you share.”

TOP TAKEAWAYS

Groundwork

- Know what failure and success look like for your particular organisation and your particular program.
- Minimise risk by:
 - Pursuing good program design.
 - Paying attention to differing risk appetites among stakeholders.
 - Having an internal communications plan, as well as engaging internal stakeholders early and often so that they own the successes as well as the failures.
 - Setting expectations internally and externally that the program is a learning exercise and you expect some missteps, from which you will learn and improve.
 - Encouraging stakeholders to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability inherent in almost any grants program.

Reframe the problem as a solution

- You need to allow failure if you're going to be a learning organisation. You need to take risks to succeed.
- Reframe outcomes – the outcome is the aspiration; it should not be your absolute determinant of failure or success.
- Rebrand failure – language helps to shape behaviour. Instead of failure, use:
 - “What would we change next time?”
 - “Lessons”
 - “Challenges”

Adopt a non-punitive learning culture

- Understand that the outcomes of your work are not binary – success versus failure. There are many elements to both of these aspects of a project or program.

- Look at how grantseekers can provide information about their own challenges, and your shortcomings, honestly and without fear of reprisals.
- Reframe your work as a grantmaker as a partnership. This will help to create a safe space in which you and grantees can report and learn from challenges.
- Hold regular, perhaps annual, reflection workshops, and regular reviews.
- Seek to “fail small” – have a strong (though proportionate) monitoring process so you can pick up on and react to problems along the way.

The media

- Some people – particularly your “political masters” – may view everything through a media lens. And if something happens which prompts negative media coverage, politicians, councillors and organisations often react strongly.
 - Combat this by mobilising your support networks – supporters of your work, who might be more numerous than your detractors but also far quieter or less visible.
 - Consider including politicians or councillors in program reviews so they understand the complexities.

Fail well

- Own the failure – this makes it easier to learn from it and move on.
- Grantmakers are the practitioners. They need to drive the cultural shift, to redefine “failure” and to reframe it in a positive light.
- Be resilient.
- Do not ask for “permission to fail”; live the values, reframe the language, model the behaviour, show vulnerability.