How to Hold a Failfest

**Pro-tip:**

Try including a Failfest session in a planning meeting or larger learning event. Include it as a light and humorous session. Invest time in recruiting the right presenters or panelists to make the event work well and deliver the key message to staff that it is okay to talk about failure. In fact, failing fast to succeed early is a key characteristic of a learning culture. Failfests that include presenters from leadership or that are in some way supported by leadership are particularly likely to have impact on organizational culture and staff engagement.

**Tone:**

* Positive, encouraging, entertaining and inspiring (high-energy)
* Balance of levity and responsibility; we can laugh at our mistakes AND acknowledge that some errors can affect other people’s lives and their trust in us

**Values reinforced:** Honesty, humility, vulnerability, courage, empathy and inclusiveness

**Intentions:**

* Create a safe environment to openly share mistakes and lessons learned
* Model a positive and empathetic response
* Reflect on current practices and identify specific ways we can improve our operations (learn and pivot)
* Facilitate information sharing and cross-unit learning
* Build in more collaboration and trust among colleagues
* Reinforce failure and experimentation as positive approaches and decrease fear-induced hesitation
* Define what failure is acceptable and demonstrate tolerance for taking risks and making mistakes
* Reduce the chilling effect created by recent media reports
* Showcase problem-solving strategies and flexible options to overcome challenges
* Demonstrate that we value learning and adaptation as much as outcomes and results

The purpose of this event is not to shame or blame the failure, but to capture and exchange the specific learning and insights we gained for our colleagues’ benefit and to improve our operations. We will promote this type of sharing as a celebration.

**Resources required:**

* + We recommend identifying colleagues who are perceived as highly successful to help share the first set of stories. As an attendee at the first ever Fail Faire in New York noted: “It’s easier to admit your failures when you are self-confident, and you will also have credibility because of your successes.”
  + A dynamic director or higher-level leader could serve as moderator.

**What is considered a failure?**

* A **F**irst **A**ttempt **I**n **L**earning
* An experience that didn’t go perfectly as planned
* Something you would do differently next time
* A decision you didn’t get right the first time
* An approach that didn’t get the results you wanted
* Something that didn’t get acted upon
* Something that didn’t get enough support
* Something you invested too little time into
* Something you worked really hard on that didn’t produce the desired results/a high return
* A missed opportunity
* An overlooked gap

Failure is just a momentary lack of success; it’s never permanent. Not all failure has a disastrous or dramatic outcome, like deaths or lawsuits. And failure doesn’t always involve bad judgment or ethical lapses. The most important aspect of failure is that you learned from the experience and adapted.

The festival will showcase examples of small issues that didn’t fully disrupt activities as well as larger issues that had a more significant impact on our operations.We will look to include a mix of both past and recent examples; we don’t recommend featuring ongoing issues because the audience may be more sensitive and the insight may not be as clear or fully developed.

**A simple, suggested format for stories of failure:**

In ten minutes or less, an individual or group can answer the following questions:

* What were you trying to do?
* What went wrong? Why do you think it failed?
* What was the impact? How did you cope? What would you do differently next time (or never do again)?
* What insights, advice and other wisdom can you share with colleagues based on your learning? What was the lesson?

Some may find that PowerPoint slides, music or skits/props are helpful aids to sharing a memorable and compelling story of failure.

**Proposed ground rules:**

* The presenter must have been personally involved in the failure; they cannot tell someone else’s story of failure
* The event would not be recorded (live streaming could be arranged for field staff access though)
* Presentations would be considered “off the record”; live tweeting/blogging would be discouraged while the initial concept is being tested
* PowerPoint slides would not be available publicly
* Donors and external partners would not be invited to attend while the initial concept is being tested; their participation can create a chilling effect and affect honest sharing
* The audience would be encouraged to get permission before retelling a presenter’s story