



LEADERSHIP

## WHY YOU SHOULD BRAG ABOUT YOUR FAILURES

STARTING A BUSINESS IN TECH ISN'T FOR THE THIN-SKINNED. TAKING RISKS AND FAILING ARE PART OF THE PROCESS.

BY RANA FLORIDA

Trial and error is how we discover and learn, starting when we develop our motor skills at a very early age. After every stumble and fall, toddlers get back up on their feet and give it another go.

It's the same thing with science, technology, and new business ideas. Edison tried more than 2,000 filaments in his incandescent light bulb before he found the right one; the investment in time and money was substantial, but the payoff was much bigger.

Risk-taking is written in our DNA; you'd think that the biggest and most successful businesses would applaud it when they see it.

But you'd be wrong.

It's surprising to me how few organizations encourage risk taking and foster a culture of outside-the-box thinking. We are taught to set goals, achieve measurable results, and assess success. But we are rarely encouraged to push the boundaries of new ideas and pioneering thoughts.

Workers keep their heads down, tending to focus more on what might go wrong and what might be lost or punished. They're afraid to take risks as they may lead to failure and they want to keep their jobs. Risk is not something that is embraced at the workplace.

## **Embracing Risk And Failure**

The world-renowned creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson has observed that you can't learn or create anything new unless you first open yourself up to the possibility of being wrong.

"No failure means no risk, which means nothing new," says [Vinod Khosla](#), founder of Sun Microsystems. "Create a culture of experimentation," he adds. "If everyone stuck to being well behaved there would be no progress."

All Star NBA powerhouse LeBron James gets it. "You can't be afraid to fail," he says. "It's the only way you succeed--you're not gonna succeed all the time, and I know that."

"The most important thing for entrepreneurs is not to be put off by failure," Sir Richard Branson said in an interview with Inc.com.

"Fail fast, fail often" is a mantra in Silicon Valley. Tech entrepreneurs don't just acknowledge their missteps on the road to success; they brag about them. They've even built a conference around the theme, FailCon, a global gathering launched in San Francisco a few years ago, with TEDx-like smaller events being hosted around the world.

Which isn't to say that all that falling on your face--and as many as 90% of tech startups do fail--doesn't take a psychic toll. Tech isn't a business for the fainthearted. "It's frustrating if you're trying and trying and all you read about is how much money Airbnb and Uber are making," a 28-year-old would-be entrepreneur told the *Guardian*. "The way startups are portrayed, everything seems an overnight success, but that's a disconnect from reality."

Still, someone's got to do it. I heard Steven Bathiche, who manages the [applied science](#) group at Microsoft, speak at the Creativity Conference in Washington, D.C., in May. He explained that his role at Microsoft was to create a culture of risk and to encourage 'stupid ideas.' "People laughed at the guy who wanted to put seatbelts in cars," he said. "People were like, this is really stupid."

"In the creative process," he continued, "things that might seem unlikely or out of the ordinary are so only because of your frame of reference. And your frame of reference is always changing." Ten years or five years from now, he explains, when one of your absurd ideas comes of age, it won't seem stupid at all. If workers are too afraid to take risks, any number of important discoveries will never come to market.

## **Learning From Failure**

The notion of failing forward is key to success. From every failure lessons are learned, things are tweaked and fine-tuned.

Sara Blakely is the outrageously successful entrepreneur who founded the undergarment company Spanx. In his profile of her in *The Startup Playbook*, David Kidder explains that her father would often ask a young Blakely "What did you fail at today?" "He made it clear that

failure was an indication that you tried something,” Kidder writes. “It was a good thing. That's a profound idea, and it speaks against many of the assumptions of our success-based culture.”

Most established companies (many of which began as disruptive longshots themselves) look at failure--any failure--as a step backward. They need to change that mindset if they don't want to stop growing.

We all need to reset our definition of failure. Too many of us view any and every business setback as shameful black marks that we can never erase.

As long as we're learning lessons that we can apply, failure is an opportunity cost of innovation. Failing forward is a good thing--it's how we improve existing processes or discover new ones; it's how we create new things. It's an inevitable part of a learning process, an occasion to grow, reflect, reinvent, and ultimately to push forward.

--*Rana Florida* is the author of [Upgrade: Taking Your Work and Life from Ordinary to Extraordinary](#). Florida also serves as CEO of [Creative Class Group](#), a consulting firm serving such clients as BMW, Starwood, IBM, Philips, Zappos, and Johnson & Johnson, and writes the *Huffington Post* column "[Your Startup Life](#)."

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