



April 2013

There is a postcard taped to my office door from the National Air and Space Museum that says simply "**Failure is not an option.**" Sitting on my desk is a notecard that reads "**Don't be afraid to fail.**" Depending on the day, I stare at one or the other: sometimes motivated by the former and sometimes consoled by the latter.

Behind every success story is an embarrassing first effort, a stumble, a setback, or a even radical change of direction. As someone who works with, observes, and visits so many amazing museums, it is often these first clumsy steps that fascinate me the most. When a museum's programs or exhibitions are very successful, it is easy to imagine that success was a foregone conclusion: that the people involved are geniuses, that they were destined for great things, and that audiences always respond to success when they see it.

But I suspect that the bigger takeaways are often in the failures and setbacks that preceded success. Far from being uncommon, failures are the stepping stones that we must use to get to where we want to go. The for-profit world is full of fabulous failures: inventors, businesses, and products that struck out a few times before hitting on the right formula or model. Henry Ford failed with two auto businesses before he created the Ford Motor Company's Model T. Few remember Steve Jobs' earlier dream for a hand-held computer, that fabulous flop called the "Newton." But it's doubtful that without the "Newton" failure, Jobs and Apple would have gotten to the phenomenal success of the iPhone and iPad.

If you want to learn how others are learning from failures, check out [Admitting Failure](#), a website created by Engineers Without Borders. It's a refreshing look at failures from brave development professionals around the world who are willing to open up and share. Admitting Failure's mission states "The most effective and innovative organizations are those that are willing to speak openly about their failures because the only truly "bad" failure is one that's repeated." Even Harvard Business Review has an entire section devoted to [Failure Chronicles](#).

So why are nonprofits generally—and museums specifically—seemingly so risk averse?

Maybe it is because the innovation-obsessed culture of the non-profit sector exacerbates the situation: be the best; make a discernible difference in people's lives; be innovative; don't make a mistake; and if you do err, certainly don't tell anyone about it. The possibility of failure creates a stress level that can override people's professional sensibilities of what is really important, or may create a fear of negative audience reactions that deters risk-taking. Yet I feel heartened when I hear museums reflect on their failures--not because I want to see people fail but because mistakes are so essential to learning. I believe it is time for our community to more openly discuss our failures and accept them as inconvenient but necessary.

Chris Anagnos
Executive Director