

# The Failure Files

perspectives on failure

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# EDITOR'S PREFACE: THE GLORY OF FAILURE

*David Hillson*

Failure. We've all done it. Some fail gradually, others fail grudgingly and occasionally people fail graciously. But is it really possible to fail gloriously?

The term 'Glorious Failure' has a certain ring to it, and perhaps that's what has attracted people to the RSA 'Glory of Failure' project since it was first suggested by Mitch Sava in April 2008 (and it wasn't an 'April Fool' hoax – I checked). Since then a small but committed group has explored the topic from a wide range of angles, looking for ways to understand what it might mean to fail gloriously. The link with the RSA ensured that our endeavours included societal and transformational dimensions, but the project soon acquired a life of its own.

Following a successful First Failure Colloquium in September 2009, it was clear that we were on to something. Speakers at that event shared their ideas and insights on failure in a variety of settings, and those present realised they were hearing a message that was quite unique and special. From that realisation *The Failure Files* was born.

This book does not pretend to be exhaustive or comprehensive on the subject of failure. Instead it reports our work-in-progress, presenting an array of essays on how failure might be encountered in different ways. Part One sets the scene, with an opening chapter from Mitch Sava and Jonathan Jewell who launched the 'Glory of Failure' project. They describe the thinking and vision behind the project, explaining why failure is an important topic and how understanding failure can transform individuals, organisations and society. A second chapter completes Part One by offering a structured framework for failure, relating it to success, suggesting some defining characteristics and proposing a typology of failure.

The main body of *The Failure Files* is in Part Two, where experts and practitioners from various professions and industries discuss failure in their area of expertise, presenting illustrative case studies and examples, and highlighting the specific nature of failure in their setting. This is where

the book's subtitle is relevant: Perspectives on Failure. Each chapter in Part Two offers a unique view of failure from a specific angle, yet together they provide a rich description of the landscape. My goal as editor was to preserve each author's voice, merely performing a 'light edit' rather than imposing a common 'house style'. As a result the Part Two chapters are all different, approaching the topic in the way that each author felt was appropriate. I'm grateful to authors for offering their insights freely, and for trusting their material to my editorial scrutiny.

Of course Part Two could have been a great deal longer, including perspectives on many other different types of failure, or multiple perspectives on each failure domain. As editor I am aware of what didn't make it into this book, but I remain confident that the material here offers the reader much food for thought and action. The disparate strands of our individual authors are however synthesised as the book closes in Part Three, with a final chapters that compares the insights in Part Two with the vision in Part One, identifying the next steps and remaining work for the 'Glory of Failure' project. We hope to leave readers with a clear impression of the direction and momentum of activity, as well as an indication of how those who are interested might get involved. *The Failure Files* close with a call to arms, encouraging each one of us to engage positively with failure wherever it is encountered and to seek transformational responses at every level.

This reminds me of a well-known motivational poster which tells us that 'We can't make SUCCESS without U.' In the same vein, I have also realised that 'Making FAILURE requires both U and I.' I hope that you will find much to challenge and inspire you in *The Failure Files*, and that all your future failures will be glorious.

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