

8 Shades of the 'F' Word

by **MARK BROWN**

Lovely Odour

'Odour' is not thought of as a positive word. Even if we put 'lovely' in front of the word 'odour' we can't really save it from negative connotations.

Take the word 'failure'. This is not necessarily seen as a positive word either. It suggests things haven't gone as we might have planned. However when it comes to experimentation, creativity and innovation we are sometimes bound to have results along the innovation journey that don't go how we might have wished or expected. Some organisations label these kind of useful results 'glorious' failures.

If 'lovely' can't redeem the word 'odour', I wonder if the word 'glorious' is enough to redeem the word 'failure'? Perhaps we need a new word for necessary, smart, glorious failure.

Let's explore the word 'failure' a little. There are many shades of meaning and emotional association for the word failure. Here I focus on eight.

Maybe Failure / Mishap

There is a Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbours came to visit. 'Such bad luck,' they said sympathetically. 'Maybe,' the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. 'How wonderful,' the neighbours exclaimed. 'Maybe,' replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbours again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. 'Maybe,' answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbours congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. 'Maybe,' said the farmer (1).

Funny Failure

When some things don't turn out as expected, we may be intrigued as in the case of a good magic trick. Jokes and humour also involve an unexpected shift, twist or reframe. For example we may laugh at the man who slips on the banana skin.

Here is a story where a parrot finds things don't quite turn out as he, the parrot, expects.

There is this conjurer who works as an entertainer on a cruise ship. As part of his act he has a parrot, who (of course) speaks. Now, the magician and the parrot don't get on well. Whenever the conjurer tries to perform a trick, for instance making a passenger's pocket watch 'disappear', the parrot feels duty bound to explain how it works, squawking 'It's in his pocket! It's in his pocket!' or whatever. But the parrot is a popular part of the act, so the magician can't simply wring his neck.

Now, one dark night, the ship sinks. The conjurer survives by managing to cling to a piece of floating debris, a plank. 'Well,' he thinks, 'this has been a pretty terrible night but at least I'm rid of that wretched parrot.' At which point, he hears a familiar squawk from the other end of the plank - 'OK, I give up,' squawks the parrot. 'What did you do with the ship?' (2)

As well as 'Maybe' failure and 'Funny' failure, there is a continuum along which the words failure, mistake and error take on quite different connotations – many negative, a few positive. And these different shades of the 'F' word have quite different implications for us and our organisation. Many are disastrous, a few 'glorious'.

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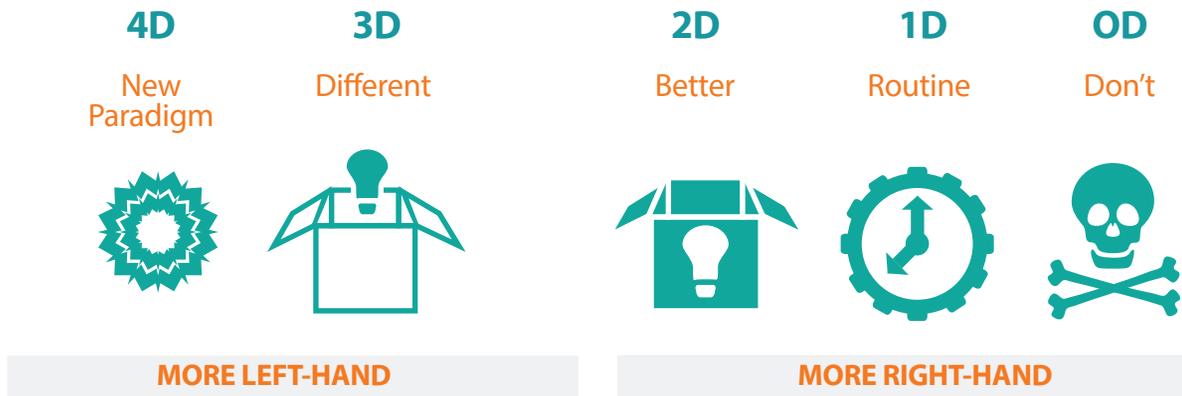


Diagram 1: The 'Left' and 'Right' Hand of the Organisation

The Right Hand Machine and the Left Hand Play-pit 4D - OD

When organisations, especially those with a past, a history, grapple with the innovation question, people give numerous reasons as to why the journey is challenging. 'Lack of time or money' some say. 'We mustn't be seen to fail' say others.

And obviously some failures are best avoided. When it comes to things we must get 'right', mistakes and failures are bad news.

OD - Natural and Usually Unforseeable Disasters/'Failures' that No One Could Have Stopped - 'Planet Busters'

These are disasters, sometimes on a planetary scale, that no man, woman or beast could possibly have averted – for example the six mile long asteroid that hit the earth wiping out the dinosaurs. Dinosaurs were hardly to blame.

OD - 'Don't - Disastrous Failures / Mistakes That Could Have Been Avoided - 'Never-Make'

OD – as in 'overdose'. These are disastrous failures. Don't do these things. They kill. Avoid these types of mistakes and failure at, almost, all costs. Some aspects of societal and organisational life need to be tightly controlled – health, safety, along with reputation, integrity and money matters. If we don't look after these 'right hand' requirements we may well die today. We don't want oil disasters in the Bay of Mexico, another Challenger disaster, another Fukushima. These are 'never-makes'.

1D - 'Do Things Right' - Performance Failures - Ideally 'Never-Make'

1D – as in a straight line, the shortest distance for travelling between two points. The most efficient and effective method of getting the job done. The metaphor is the 'machine' that runs with huge precision and success. Our day-to-day business ideally runs like a well-honed machine. Ideally it 'performs' perfectly.

The cast of a play may rehearse endlessly before they can put on the perfect show or performance. They can make mistakes, forget their lines but in rehearsal only. This is the time to learn and eliminate those mistakes. This is the learning phase, not the performance phase. Then they perform, ideally perfectly.

Like the perfect play or orchestral performance we want our organisational machine to perform with ideally zero mistakes or errors. Many organisations espouse the value of 'Get it Right First Time' for these kind of machine perfect 'performances'.

2D - 'Bettering' or Kaizen Failures - 'Rarely-Make'

2D is one step up from routine performance. We don't just want to run things as normal we now want to improve what we do too. We want to do things 'better'. The Japanese call this kind of improvement 'kaizen'. For example our company may add incremental features to a camera or phone we manufacture. And simultaneously we may find ways to reduce costs in the manufacturing process itself.

In a competitive and changing world we very often have to find these ways to do things better, to get the machine to run in a more effective, less expensive, more customer enchanting way. We therefore look to how we can do everything better to delight our customers and all other stakeholders. Many organisations have clear methods to do this – continuous improvement, kaizen and lean thinking initiatives. Here we tweak the machine and as there is no significant deviation from the patterns of the past, no significant degree of unpredictability, these changes are ideally introduced without unwanted or unexpected outcomes. Mistakes should happen rarely, if it at all. This is incremental, evolutionary right hand creativity, sometimes called exploitative creativity, maximizing what we have.

And yet just as we tweak our products and services we may well find our competitors do the same thing. Therefore we need to move beyond 2D right hand creativity onto 3D left hand creativity.

3D and 4D - 'Differentiating' or Kaikaku - Glorious Failures - 'Must-Make'

3D – revolutionary creativity. If the word 'better' captures the essence of evolutionary creativity, the words 'different' and 'new' describe the heart of revolutionary creativity. The Japanese call this kind of major change 'kaikaku'. This is also called exploratory creativity, bringing the new into existence.

Examples include the shift from emulsion film to digital photography, vinyl to CD to computer downloads, the impact of optical fibre transmission for established copper wire phone companies.

4D – takes us beyond the world we know. The old order is completely overthrown. It's game over. A new 'paradigm' emerges. However the word 'paradigm' has been so overused in the business world that some think it best avoided. Whereas 'paradigm' in business jargon may now be used to refer to any big change, the term was originally used to describe profound changes in scientific understanding and worldview (3), referring to the emergence of a new world that was quite invisible to the earlier order. See for example the transition between the worldview of Newtonian physics and the Einsteinian relativistic worldview.

A couple of examples - a shift from a controlled communist economy to a free-market capitalist one; a shift from an ecologically damaging industrial base to one that respects and nurtures mother earth.

Such left hand creativity, whether 3D or the much rarer 4D, drives a step change, is discontinuous and revolutionary. Whereas with 2D right hand creativity we focus on doing everything 'better', with 3D left hand creativity we are now looking at how to do things 'differently' and 'doing new things'. In 4D we create a completely new world.

And for 3D thinking the metaphor is the 'play-pit'. The thinking needs to be more relaxed. We play. We hunt the muse. We stalk serendipity. We connect with fresh experiences and knowledge. We forge surprising connections between neurons, thoughts and people. 'Eurekas' abound. (In 4D, to continue the metaphor, we probably discard the play-pit altogether. What then follows? God knows, perhaps.)

And so unlike evolutionary creativity, revolutionary creativity is without precedent, there are few or no useful patterns of the past. We are in complete darkness. Gone is the crisp light of certainty as we venture cautiously into these darkest unknowns of unpredictability.

To Ensure Any Chance of Predictability for the Future of Our Organisation We Must Embrace Unpredictability

And here is a paradox, heads of teams, functions and organisations are expected to predict their performance for, say, the next quarter. 'We must make the numbers'. Predictability and certainty are the name of the game.

And here is the rub – *the only way to ensure there is a longer-term future and thereby predictability for any continuing existence of our organisation is to positively embrace unpredictability.*

And our primary tool for discovery, to bring light to the darkness, is through experimentation. We must enter the dark to have any hope of illumination as to ways forward. And it may be there are none. Yet there may be many. The only way to find out is through experimentation. This is where mistakes and failures CAN become 'glorious' and are to be recognised, rewarded and applauded. But only if...

'If We Learn From Our Mistakes, Shouldn't We Try to Make as Many as Possible?'

When I talk about the left hand of experimentation, creativity and innovation people correctly assume this universe of thought is far less predictable than we find in the 1D world of efficient machine performance and the 2D world of kaizen. To use the management jargon this 3D world is 'looser', the 1D and 2D worlds are far 'tighter'. Yes, the 3D world is necessarily more relaxed so that new thoughts and ideas can occur at the shimmering and glimmering edges of consciousness. However this is no excuse for SLOPPINESS when it comes to trying out new ideas and running experiments. Within this left hand universe we must bring right hand rigour to these experiments.

We don't try any old experiment. Experiments take time and money. And we can't keep experimenting for too long. The money that comes from the 'machine' to support the 'play-pit' is finite and is to be used wisely. Experiments must be FIT – FAST INTELLIGENT TESTS. This experiment must be 'the' or one of the best ways forward. The outcome must provide insight and oversight. The outcome is, as scientists say, a 'result'. It provides intelligence. And such intelligence is driven by fast intelligent 'must-make' tests – be the outcome as we expected or otherwise. Our thinking is confirmed or disconfirmed. Then we can move on.

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Masquerading 'Must-Make'

And there are two types of 3D/4D mistakes, one good, one bad. The good or glorious mistake comes from clever intelligent testing – which are MUST-MAKES or 'glorious' mistakes. The bad mistake comes from sloppy thinking, where the hypothesis to be tested is not honed or the planned experiment not elegantly designed. These are not 'glorious' failures or mistakes, they are not MUST-MAKES, they are sloppy, pretending, masquerading 'must-makes'. They are in fact another form of 'never-make'.

So we've touched on eight shades of the 'F' word:

1. Maybe failure/mishap
2. Funny failure
3. OD – disasters, 'planet buster' failures that are beyond our control
4. OD – 'DON'T' - disastrous failure – that we want to 'never-make'
5. 1D – 'DO THINGS RIGHT' – otherwise we get performance failure, which we ideally 'never-make'
6. 2D – 'BETTERING'; kaizen failure, which we hope only, if ever, to 'rarely-make'
7. 3D/4D – 'DIFFERENTIING'; kaikaku, glorious failures that are 'must-makes'. These 'must-makes' need to be FIT, fast, intelligent tests. If there are not FIT they are
8. Masquerading must-makes, in fact 'never-makes'.

In the next article I will look at how we conduct 'fast intelligent tests', 'must-makes' and avoid 'masquerading must-makes'.

Glorious Odour

So to conclude do we need a new expression for 'glorious failure' or is the phrase strong and useful enough? Does 'glorious' take the stink out of 'failure'?

Here is my view. There are parts of the world where the word failure has little or no stigma and may even have a halo. Failed entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley and equivalents can be seen as heroes en route to inevitable success. However in many legacy rich organisations, especially if their product or service involves high levels of to be avoided risk – as in space and air travel, power, nuclear, chemicals, construction, pharmaceuticals, food, water, financial services – and the list goes on – the word failure can have very serious and negative connotations. Rightly so. Failure and mistakes kill people, reputations and organisations. So I don't believe 'glorious' is enough to take the pong out of 'failure'.

Furthermore it seems risky and a little odd to have just the one word 'failure' to warn people of, on the right hand, what they must never do, and on the left hand to use the same word to encourage them what to do.

Logically we don't use the word 'danger' in one precarious setting, like at a cliff edge, only to use the same word plus an adjective, as in, for example, 'safe danger', in a less risky setting.

So what are possible contenders?

First of all I may need to prove myself wrong – an ability that we will see in the next article lies at the heart of how to do fast intelligent tests. Perhaps 'glorious failure' will win the day.

Or, perhaps, like scientists, we ignore the word 'failure' and talk instead about 'results' and if they are not what we expected, we call them 'unpredicted results or outcomes'.

I quite like 'must-makes' too. Although it's perhaps a bit clunky. And providing these are never 'masquerading must-makes' the word 'must-make' does get to the heart of the way forward in the dark and uncertain, 3D and 4D, left hand world.

When it comes to a 'must-make' we know that we have devised an essential fast intelligent test and that only by carrying out this test can we begin to bring some light to the otherwise unfathomable dark. Our 'must-makes' are the only way to turn the unpredictable into the predictable. And yes we may still fail even if we do conduct these fast intelligent tests - these must-makes. But we certainly will fail if we don't have a go. When dealing with the left hand the left hand FIT 'must-makes' are our best way forward in life, science, art and the world of work and organisations.

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1. www.katinkahesselink.net/tibet/zen.html
2. www.ex-parrot.com/~chris/silly/parrot.html
3. T.S. Kuhn "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1970) University of Chicago Press