Failure is not a four-letter word:

Learning to embrace failure in our libraries.
Hello

I am Dayna DeBenedet

I am the CEO of the Dryden Public Library, a quilting fanatic, and a podcast enthusiast. You can find me at @librarianishly.

Hi!
“We’re missing this opportunity to talk about all of the layers of failure: how it can help, how it can hurt, how sometimes it’s your fault, how sometimes it isn’t, how sometimes it’s about taking a big risk, and how sometimes failure is not doing anything all.”

Ilana Ben-Ari, 21 Toys
Why does failure happen?
Why do programs, services and initiatives fail? How, and when, do we know that something is failing?

What is failure?
How do we understand failure in our libraries? What does it look like and how do we evaluate it?

How can we cultivate failure as a skill?
How can we change our view of failure? How do we implement change? Can failure be a skill?

How should we deal with failure?
How do our systems respond to failure? What can we learn? What are the benefits and downsides of failure?
01
What is failure?
Thinking about failure in our libraries

- Do you talk about failure in your workplace? If so, how do you talk about it?
- Do you feel comfortable taking risks at work?
- Do you feel supported when you take risks?
- Do you feel supported when projects / programs / services you are involved in fail?
- How are we evaluating projects / programs / services in our libraries? Are we effective at measuring success and failure?
What does \textbf{failure} look like in our \textit{libraries}?
What does **failure** look like in our libraries?

**Low Numbers**
Low statistics or attendance. Fewer attendees week over week.

**Low Engagement**
Low excitement or engagement. Does not engage patrons to accomplish its goal.

**Lack of growth**
Momentum is not building, program does not attract new patrons week over week.

**Low return**
Return on investment is low - cost of the program/service is too high vs. the use/engagement.

**Poor policy**
Gaps or inadequacies in policies that lead to a negative experience for patrons or staff. Policy is not in place to properly support initiatives.

**Discontent**
Patrons, staff or stakeholders are unhappy and/or disappointed.
How do we talk about failure?

**Language**

- What type of language do we use?

**Tone**

- What is our tone? Are we generally positive or negative?

**Frequency**

- Do we talk openly and regularly about failure?

**Company**

- Who do we talk about failure with? Colleagues? Friends? Family?
Why does failure happen?
What are the factors that contribute to failure?

Internal Factors
- Organizational Failure
- Resource Failure
- Planning Failure

External Factors
- Feedback Failure
- Knowledge Failure
- “Universe” Failure
Examining the **internal** factors.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Failure</th>
<th>Resource Failure</th>
<th>Planning Failure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Policy is not in place to support the initiative.</td>
<td>• Supplies or funding are not available.</td>
<td>• Insufficient planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Employees lack organizational support from management/board.</td>
<td>• Inadequate space, staffing or time.</td>
<td>• Rushing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Lack of buy-in</td>
<td>• Inadequate support for marketing, implementation etc.</td>
<td>• Planning did not account for, or overlooked, important factors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Poorly managed change</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Disorganization</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Misunderstanding of audience.</td>
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Examine the external factors.

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<th>Feedback Failure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest from patrons/public despite adequate planning and marketing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Missing the trend”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overcrowded market</td>
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<td>Competition with private business</td>
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<th>Knowledge Failure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Patrons or public don’t understand the initiative or lack understanding of the Library.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disconnect between what patrons want and our understanding of what they want.</td>
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<th>“Universe” Failure</th>
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<tr>
<td>Just because.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Blame it on the weather”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling conflicts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unforeseen circumstances</td>
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When should you "kill" a project?

Some projects are amazing ideas, but due to a variety of internal and external factors they do not succeed.

When should we end a project or initiative?

- When there isn’t enough interest
- When it no longer serves our goals or priorities
- When you are no longer motivated by it
- When the return on investment is too low
What are we measuring when we evaluate our programs and services?

Evaluation

- **Attendance**: How many people attend. Door counts, participants, registrations etc.
- **Circulation**: How many resources are being borrowed.
- **Satisfaction**: Whether people “enjoyed” the program.
- **Impact**: Whether the program fulfilled a need or met a stated goal.
Are we good at measuring success and failure?
Do our stakeholders understand our vision of success?

Do our boards, municipal councils, community partners, funders, etc. understand our strategic goals, mission and vision?
How should we deal with failure?
How should we talk about failure?

Iterating
- Refining ideas for continual improvement.

Drafting
- Testing out an idea, while leaving room for development and change.

Practicing
- Developing new skills and techniques, an ongoing process.

Learning
- Gaining knowledge and understanding of our communities, staff and patrons.
How do our **systems** respond to failure?

How we respond to challenges and failure at an organizational level determines how successful we will be at capitalizing on positive failure.

- Are we resilient?
- Are our libraries resilient?
- Do we have a Plan B?
- Do we take the time to learn from failure or do we try to hide it away?
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Resource Loss</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Loss of time, money or supplies.</td>
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<td>• Strain on budgets</td>
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<td>• Complicated reporting on funding (if tied to grant etc.)</td>
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<th>Morale</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Negative responses from staff or patrons.</td>
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<td>• Increased stress on employees.</td>
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<td>• Employees feel unsupported and/or disengaged from their work</td>
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<th>Perception</th>
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<td>• Negative perception from stakeholders, including management, board, council, funders etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Fear of, or actual, negative response from the public.</td>
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<td>• Public backlash.</td>
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What are the benefits of failure?

**Creativity**
Finding solutions to problems activates creativity.

**Innovation**
No one ever came up with a great new idea without coming up with a few bad new ideas. Failure is essential to innovation.

**Skill building**
Dealing with failure helps identify gaps in skills and training. Learning from failure also helps us develop new skills and put them into practice.

**Growth**
Failure helps to grow new ideas. The process of iterating and drafting helps us hone in on ideas and develop new ways of solving problems.

**Resilience**
Failure teaches us how to learn from our mistakes and keep going, it builds stronger staff and libraries.

**Understanding**
Failure can help us better understand our patrons, staff and community. Learning where we missed the mark helps us understand how to meet our patrons' needs next time.

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“Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker.”

Denis Waitley
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How can we cultivate failure as a skill?
Cultivating failure as a skill

How can we learn to fail well?
“We need to start teaching failure education, not only because it’s part of being human, but because we all respond to disappointment, risk, opportunities, and challenges differently. Once we better understand how we respond to failure, how our colleagues respond to failure, and how our systems respond to failure, then we will be better equipped to deal with failure. Instead of fearing it, we will start designing for and around it.”

Ilana Ben-Ari, 21 Toys
Embracing **positive failure** at work.

We can be intentional about the way we treat failure in our workplaces - creating space and opportunities for **positive failure**.

Positive failure is:

- Failure that results in learning and growth
- Failure that leads to a deeper understanding of a problem
- Failure that results in creativity and problem-solving
- Failure that is a step toward something rather than an end.
Embracing positive failure at work.

Some strategies for cultivating positive failure include:

- Teaching people how to fail
  - 21 Toys/Failure Toy
  - Prototyping

- Ensuring that your organization values the things that failure can teach us
  - Resilience
  - Creativity
  - Community

- Making space to reflect on failure and setting a positive tone
  - Dismiss the fear of failure
  - Intentional language and tone

- Evaluate your evaluation process.

- Bring the “Maker” ethos out of the maker space and into the whole library.
Managing change is one of the most difficult aspects of any role.

Managing change in libraries means taking a holistic approach in evaluating how the change will impact employees, patrons, stakeholders and public perception.

**Why is change so scary?**
- Unknown impacts
- Personal fears or experiences
- Fear of failing at something knew
- Leaving the comfortable behind
- Overwhelmed by new roles or expectations
- Lack of support, knowledge or understanding
The bigger the **innovation** the bigger the **risk**.
How can we minimize the fear of taking risks?

**Risk and Innovation**

**Goal Setting**
Make sure the goals and vision for a project are clear before you begin.

**Support**
Make sure that the proper support system and resources are in place.

**Open Communication**
Talk. Talk. Talk.

**Failure**
Anticipate mistakes, missteps and failures, and approach them with positivity.
Failure is normal, healthy and important.
We are all failures - at least the best of us are”

—J.M. Barrie
author of Peter Pan
Thanks!

Does anyone have any questions?

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