

On intelligent fast failure: leaping √ into regenerative creativity

by leigh melander

I have spent much of my life as a performing and creative artist – as a dancer, musician, actor, and writer. While there are deep creative impulses and rewards in a life spent this way, there is also a whole lot of failure. Being an artist, particularly a freelance artist in this culture, is like spending your life as an entrepreneur caught in an endless cycle of under funded start-up companies, always scrambling towards the next hope of an opportunity.

I struggled with this dance with failure for years. So many of the ideas and efforts that I tried didn't work – whether they were a magazine article submitted and turned down, a demo recording sent to a club for a gig that didn't happen, or, the most horrific of all, one of the hundreds of auditions where I poured my little artistic actor heart out to a group of stone-faced people who never called me back. Failure in this context is not only constant, but personal. And truly painful.

I was in my early twenties and feeling consumed by this failure when my father handed me a book by a colleague at Penn State in the vague hope that maybe it could help pry me out of my deep depression about what I was not achieving in my life. Much to my amazement, I found myself described in that book. I realized that I would have an idea, love it, shape it, nurture it, send it out into the world, watch it get smashed, and be utterly devastated. It would take me often months to recover my sense of creative energy, and when I did, I'd have another idea, love it, shape it, nurture it, send it out into the world, and watch it get smashed. And I would feel just as annihilated.

For me, there are three extremely important concepts wrapped in the idea of "intelligent fast failure." First, when I have lots of ideas spinning and am tossing them outwards into the world, each one becomes a part of a larger whole, rather than the only thing that consumes me. This is emotionally powerful because it strips the process of the pain of feeling personally walloped because my beautiful idea didn't catch anyone's attention. Second, stepping away from a belief that this is a linear process is exceedingly important, not only because it allows for a contracted time frame for ideas to hit the light of day, but more importantly, this spiraling dynamic reflects the nature of the creative process itself. Third, and perhaps most importantly, by reflecting creativity's own dynamics, a different kind of energy emerges, and ideas begin to whirl, bounce off, and build upon one another. I find myself entering into a sort of imaginal energy field that feeds itself, and my ideas become richer, come faster, and my creative energy seems boundless. Failure becomes transmuted into a playground to experiment, and an idea that seemed to die on the vine often comes back to life in a different form. In that moment, the process of putting the idea out into the world becomes itself a creative process rather than drudgery that brings with it great chances of disappointment.

This leap into the ideas of intelligent fast failure has been, without question and without hyperbole, a life-changing experience for me. I have utilized it in my work as an artist, as a scholar, and as a community activist – if something doesn't seem to work, it simply means I need to jump back into the playground with it and let it re-invent itself. Ultimately, it has allowed me to explore and expand on my life creatively, with an ongoing sense of possibility and belief in the power of imagination that is both sustaining and ever-expanding.

A response to *The Art of Innovation, Using Intelligent Fast Failure*, by J.V. Matson, used as a teaching tool in his Penn State class on entrepreneurship and innovation.

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