# Managing a Fear of Failure When Pivoting

By Dara Weinerman Steinberg

*I know we're supposed to take risks and fail forward, but it feels like right now failure is a huge risk.*

A client said this to me shortly after pandemic closures started, and it has been echoing in my head since. We discussed it briefly.

"Yes," I said, "the stakes are higher. However, with the closures you are, by necessity, already experimenting. Regardless of how each experiment turns out, ultimately, the organization is progressing because you're learning what works for that organization." My client's comment about failure was not the crux of our conversation, however, my answer was not as robust as I'd have liked. Since then, I've been thinking about the anxiety underlying the question of pivoting, and how nonprofits can address the risk of failure so they can maximize promising outcomes and minimize the impact of experiments that don't work out.

Let's start by acknowledging that the fear is real and valid. Most nonprofits operate from a perpetually precarious position and the repercussions of failing can be serious even in "normal times." The flip side of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism is that there is no way to coast by doing "business as usual," because when so much has changed and continues to change, everything is an experiment, whether we call it one or not.

When we are afraid, freezing is a natural response. The stakes right now are high – the survival of our organizations, our jobs and the livelihoods of our colleagues, and our ability to deliver important programs and services to the community. The emotional bandwidth it takes to keep going, while also experimenting and possibly experiencing failure is a lot to ask. Yet, not engaging in deliberate experimentation has potentially higher costs.

So, how can you employ a process and a mindset to make both the experimentation and the failure you will undoubtedly encounter through experimentation easier and more beneficial for your organization?

1. **Intention** & **Attention**

Approach change deliberately. Start by thinking about your intention: what do you want to achieve from this program/operational shift? What information do you need to gather to know if you've achieved your intent? At the same time, work deliberately and determine how you will monitor the experiment (attention). When will you review your intentions and data; what will you evaluate? This could be as simple as comparing what was expected to what occurred. Ask: What did we learn? What do we do next?

Intention and attention provide a structure to proceed; they also provide the comfort of having a plan in the midst of uncertainty. Furthermore, generally stakeholders and funders alike respond well when an organization shares its intentions, because it increases their confidence that you are operating thoughtfully and responsibly by addressing the factors in your control.

2. **Go small to go big**

A classic way to minimize risk is to try things on a smaller scale first. This is a great way to experiment with ideas. In a time of limited resources, it's easy to say, "we don't have enough X to try this." Instead, consider how you can do it in a more limited way. Strive for proof of concept, not perfection. Briefly explore the basic concepts from Lean Startup and rapid prototyping; they can help you design inexpensive experiments. Don't strive for world-class; strive for good-to-excellent (within the bounds of what your resources allow). Try things on a smaller scale, set expectations accordingly, learn what's possible at that resource point, and *then* determine whether to invest further – whether that investment is time, money, or (especially) your team's energy.

3. **When things don't go as expected, remember to maintain perspective**

We don't know what new ideas might completely change our organizations. Wonderful things are coming out of new programs and new ways of relating to one another. At the same time, though, organizations are laying off and furloughing people and programs are closing – some organizations may close. When we are in a state of anxiety, EVERYTHING can seem important, but not everything is. It's a truism to say that things will not go as expected, and it's also true that how you react to these failures and challenges is important to your well-being, your team's well-being, and your organization's potential for future success. When you pay attention to your experiments and can see whether you have fallen short of your intentions, consider whether you've learned anything useful, then employ favorite anxiety management techniques, chalk it up to experience, and move on.

One technique that I find helpful is to ask, *"Will this matter 5 minutes from now? 5 days? 5 weeks? 5 months? 5 years?"* This grounding technique can help you allocate the appropriate amount of thought and mental energy, remember not to sweat every decision, and to refocus on the things that matter.

Ideally, we develop organizational cultures that value innovation and learning, and that consciously employ pivots – big and small. There's no doubt that this process is more intensive now, given the pandemic and the economic precarity we're all facing. Not one organization hasn't pivoted whether consciously or not, proactively, or in reaction to pandemic restrictions.

Some organizations have discovered unexpected opportunities as a result – whether it is a new audience they can access online or some operational processes that can be streamlined with minimal investment. Remember to celebrate these successes and recognize the work of the team that made it possible. Also, recognize the work that goes into less successful experiments.

In August, I will be moderating a Zoom panel discussion on pivoting hosted by Sketchpad, during which I'll interview a panel of Jewish nonprofit professionals about their experience having undergone a significant organizational pivot. We'll be looking at factors that led their organizations to pivot – both from a programmatic and operational standpoint – as well as the logistical components of pivoting, tools for making a successful pivot, and pivoting during or as a result of the current public health and economic crises. You can find out more about the session and RSVP via SketchPad's website. We encourage you to join us!

A professional group I belong frequently talks about "the coronacoaster" – those up and down emotions we all face as we try to navigate our jobs, lives, children, extended families during the pandemic. I'd like to end by sharing one of my favorite quotes on failure, from Erin Hanson, because the opposite of failure can be a moment of exhilaration: *"What if I fall? Oh but my darling, what if you fly?"*

*Dara Weinerman Steinberg is Principal of Steinberg Consulting where she counsels nonprofits and philanthropists to advance their strategy and organizational development. www.darasteinbergconsulting.com*

https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/managing-a-fear-of-failure-when-pivoting