The Fear of Failure or *Luctor et Emergo*[i]
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I have always found comedians to be some of the most intelligent people I have encountered. Bill Cosby is certainly no exception. He said: "In order to succeed, your desire for success should be greater than your fear of failure." We don't talk about failure enough. Not in our private lives. Not in the workplace. Yet we must. I applaud, therefore, the EAIE and AIEA for making this issue the key question of their latest joint meeting.

> *"Success is not built on success. It's built on failure. It's built on frustration. Sometimes it's built on catastrophe."*
> *- Sumner Redstone*

Together, the EAIE and the AIEA have in the past run joint leaderships roundtables. I had the honor and pleasure to join, for the second time, this interesting group of international practitioners in Brno, Czech Republic a day before the annual EAIE conference got underway in September. The theme for the day-long discussion was "The beauty and necessity of failure."

What does one need to succeed in anything? Knowledge, capacity and vision come to mind. By vision I mean the tenacity to dream, to dare. One has to lift oneself up out of the comfort zone, pushing the limits of imagination to break the status quo and challenge commonly accepted notions. This by necessity means taking (calculated) risks. This could, of course, lead to failure. But it is precisely at this juncture that one can grow by capitalizing on the opportunity to reflect, internalize, re-think, re-group, and most importantly re-try. The last thing one should do here is to give up, to regress, to retreat.

Life is linear at the macro level. There is a start date. There is an end date. At the micro level, though, life is anything but linear. It is a series of loops; learning loops. At the personal and professional levels we all experience ups and downs; successes and failures. It is how we confront these moments that define us and determine how we live our lives.

So, what is failure and what is it not?

• Failure is normal; it is commonplace. It is not unusual. It is a requirement of life, of growth. Building a resilient culture involves recognizing that failure can and will occur, and that in innovation the odds of failure may increase dramatically. And innovative culture prepares to test concepts and learn from mistakes to assure perpetual innovation and improvement.

• Failure is inevitable; we might as well embrace it. How we fail is key. Probably the best-known British entrepreneur of our day, Sir Richard Branson, said: "Do not be embarrassed by your failures, learn from them and start again."

• Failure is liberating; the worst has already happened. It drives change; it is a pathway to improvement. Failure is an educational lesson, a tool. One can fail better.

• Failure fuels contingency plans. Preparing for the possibility of failure makes an organization more adaptable. And it forces you to do your homework.

• Failure enables us to recognize and value success.

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• Failure builds character, strength; it differentiates us. If it doesn't kill us, it strengthens us. A willingness to fail displays courage, risk-taking, envelope-pushing

• With every failure you are more likely to succeed "next time." Building a team approach to effective risk assessment and decision making results in a stronger organization. All of us can and should learn from how successful organizations respond to and address failure; and conversely, how struggling organizations do not. Recognizing the potential impact of failure on decision-making or other processes helps to gird that process against failure.

• Failure does not necessarily show weakness. Think to one of the great basketball players. Michael Jordan said: "I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying."

• Failure does not necessarily demonstrate lack of intellect; it does not necessarily reveal lack of good judgment.

• Failure does not necessarily show poor planning; it does not necessarily demonstrate bad management

It is true that:

• Failure can be inefficient. We never know when we initiate any project whether it will fail or succeed. Clearly, starting any project when you know it will fail is inefficient. You should expect to succeed, but preparing for failure allows you to adapt.

• Failure can be demoralizing. Morale is often impacted by success or failure, and that impact is in turn governed by expectations. An organization which expects to succeed at all times is perhaps not as well prepared for inevitable failure. Is a culture that expects to learn from failure more resilient?

• Failure can be politically divisive. Most certainly correct, but much of the fallout from failure is driven by the buy-in or lack of buy-in to the initial idea. Is there a process in an organization that facilitates buy-in to new ideas or pilots, with full knowledge of risk, so that all can learn from identifying the factors that led to failure?

• Failure is not necessarily smart in a competitive environment. Again absolutely correct. Too much failure leads to a terminal state. But how do successful organizations address competitive failure? What can be learned from that? Failing to embrace this concept suggests failure never exists.

• Failure is potentially disruptive of process. Again this suggests a rigid process which cannot adapt to failure. A process which cannot withstand failure is destined to fail.

In the words of Mike Proctor, a colleague from the University of Arizona who was at the roundtable: "One of the interesting phenomena as the day's discussions progressed was, at least I thought, a tendency toward a more academic discussion rather than saying what we take from this; what do we do with it. Essential failure is almost a truism, but how can we take this and create more innovative institutions? A workshop around building a culture more supportive of innovative failure? A team of mentors? Training modules? Not sure, but it would be nice to see something come from it." I agree. We need a sustainable mechanism to help us teach and embrace failure.

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[i] Thanks to my roundtable colleague, Jeanine Gregersen-Hermans of the University of Hull for the title.