

# How to ... fail well

By the FailSpace team



Photo by Vlad Chețan from Pexels

**CENTRE FOR  
CULTURAL VALUE**

## Recognising, acknowledging and learning from failure

When reflecting on your work as an individual, within your organisation, or sharing stories externally with funders or other stakeholders, how easy is it to be honest? Really honest?

Have you ever found it hard to talk about things that don't work?

Do you wish you could share your failures more openly?

Or feel the stories of success you hear about other work don't represent the way you feel about your own?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you are not alone. Our research suggested that a lot of people working in the cultural sector find it hard to talk openly about failures.

This how to guide, created by the [FailSpace project](#) team, will help you to understand how to better recognise, acknowledge and learn from failure.

## Why is it important to critically reflect on failure?

*"If everything always worked perfectly, you're probably not taking as many risks as you might be"* - cultural participant in our research

As researchers, cultural practitioners or policy makers, we are all constantly involved in the process of evaluating our work. But too often the focus of such practices is on accounting for what we have done instead of reflecting on how we might improve what we do next. As a result we tend mainly to tell stories that celebrate success, which in turn lead to what Michael Howlett describes as 'technical learning ... repeating over and over again the errors of the past' (Howlett, 2012a).

From the research the FailSpace team has done in the cultural sector, this is not surprising. In a context where many professionals see success and failure as binary opposites, there is a belief that success brings rewards, in terms of reputation and funding, whereas failure results in punishment. If there is any reflection on failure, it tends to take place in private and is not often shared. But this reduces opportunities for the type of 'social learning' that is necessary to enact meaningful and sustainable change.

We believe that very little of what we do could ever be called an outright success or outright failure. Instead, success and failure exist at different points along a spectrum. So, we can (and do) succeed and fail simultaneously: in different elements of the work, to differing degrees, at different stages, and for different people.

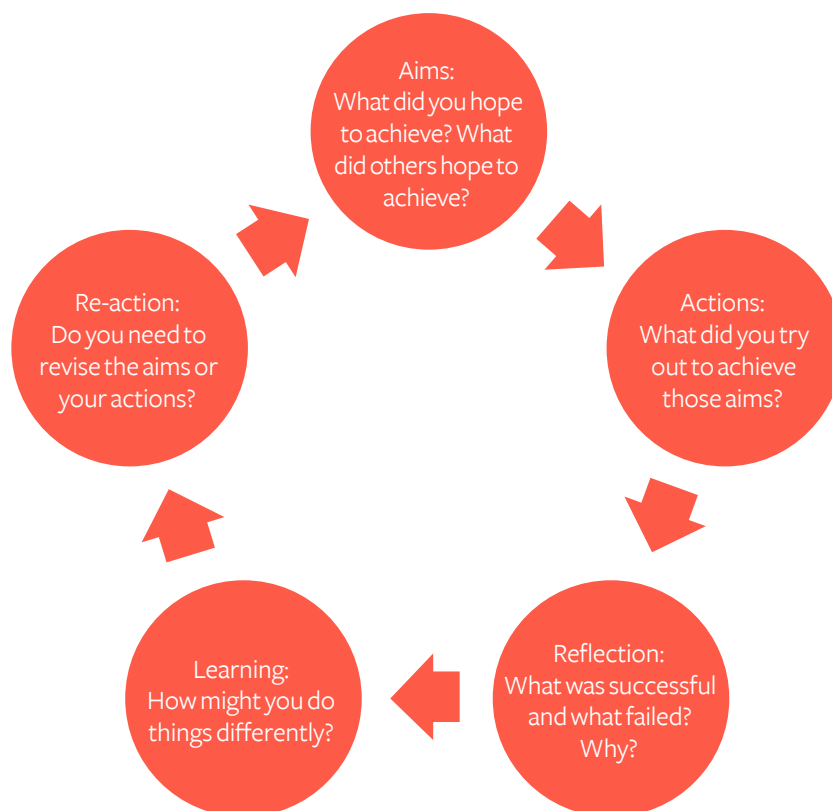
While several cultural professionals we spoke to said they have the Samuel Beckett quote "fail, fail again, fail better" pinned on their office wall, most saw this as an aspiration rather than something they found easy to do. This guide aims to help you make this a reality!

So, to become true learning organisations – collaborating to make the sector more equitable and inclusive – what if we didn't ask if something is a success or a failure? Instead, what if we ask: **Success or failure for whom? To what degree? And to what effect?** This change in perspective allows for more critical reflection in which success and failure can co-exist, and where different points of view are not only valid, but essential to understand the cultural value of our work.

## How does this guide work?

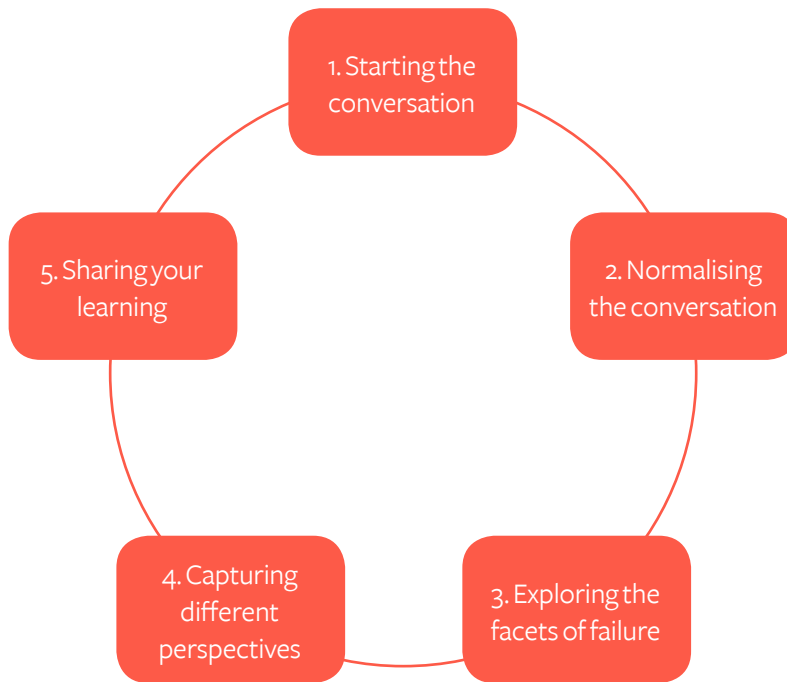
This guide is based on the principles of ‘critical reflection’ (Hansen 2013), which rather than through introspection, encourages conversations between people who hold different points of view, at different stages throughout the life cycle of a project. It aims to facilitate ‘social learning’ (May 1992), recognising the value of openness and honesty in bringing about change.

There are many theories on reflective learning, but they are all based on a cyclical process that involves testing, reviewing, learning, and revising rather than a linear process based on inputs and outputs, which so many evaluation models use. The following chart illustrates this process and the kinds of questions you might already ask when reviewing any action.



While this approach is commonplace, what we found during our research was that for many people working in the cultural sector, fear, discomfort or just resistance made it difficult to talk about what didn't go as expected, let alone failure. It was even harder to identify what they had learnt from their reflection if they had changed their practice as a result, or how they had shared their learning openly with others.

But what we also found was that normalising conversations of failure makes it easier to do so. So, this guide offers a five stage process to help artists, organisations, participants and funders have more open and honest conversations about failures which we hope will support more social learning in the cultural sector.



We have designed a range of tools to support each of these stages which are free to download from [our website](#). However, our tools are not intended to be prescriptive and there will be many other ways you might find to help you identify, acknowledge, and learn from failure. The information below explains our process and provides some ideas to get you started.

## 1. Starting the conversation

Developing an understanding of the successes and failures that can co-exist side by side make it easier to talk about failures. To this end, we designed a storybook that tells two stories of a cultural project. One is the narrative of success we most commonly hear and the other is a narrative of failure that we seldom share. [Find out more and download the book](#).

In addition, you could look back at a previous report or evaluation you have done of your own work and think about how you could tell the story of that project in a different way. This might be taking a different perspective, telling a different narrative or just reinstating some elements of the story that you had previously left out. You might do this on your own or in a team.

### Try it yourself:

Take a story of success you tell to promote your work, either to funders, commissioners or audiences. Think about what other versions of the story would look like if you wanted to share the failures more openly. As you write these out, think about the following questions:

- Who is the narrator and who is the audience for the different versions of the story you are telling?
- How might the story change if you looked from a different perspective?
- What new insights do the new stories of failure give you?
- What stops you sharing them?

## 2. Normalising the conversation

The more people hear others share stories of failure, the more they are willing to do so themselves. Sharing our own stories and modelling that behaviour also makes people less resistant and helps us all acknowledge our own failures.

In our research, we recorded a number of actors voicing true stories of failures we had gathered from our interviewees, which [you can listen to on our website](#). We also designed a series of postcards to encourage people to share their own stories of failure with people they wouldn't normally. Once people had other examples to get them going, they were much more willing to open up and share their own.



### Try it yourself:

If you are working on your own or in a group either look at some of the stories we have collected or at the ones you created yourself in starting the conversation and think about the following questions:

- Which stories of failure stood out most to you and why?
- Which were familiar and which were surprising?
- How do these stories relate to the work you do?
- What is the learning from them? For you? For your organisation? For the sector?

### 3. Exploring the five facets of failure

Hopefully you are starting to feel more comfortable talking about failure!

The next stage is about embedding this into the way you work by defining what success and failure might look like in your work and for the different stakeholders you might be working with.

Through consultation with cultural professionals, we have identified Five Facets of Failure (well ok, they apply to success too but that doesn't fit the alliteration). Each has six degrees of delivery:



- Degrees of failure / success**
- Outright Failure
  - Precarious Failure
  - Tolerable Failure
  - Conflicted Success
  - Resilient Success
  - Outright Success

**Purpose** – This facet relates to the attainment of stated aims, objectives and outcomes of the project or policy. It also relates to the delivery of intended benefits for target groups.

**Process** – This facet relates to the design and implementation of the project/policy. It encompasses all of the actions, activities and stages of a project/policy from beginning to end.

**Participation** – This facet relates to who participates in the project/policy and how, at every stage from design to delivery and evaluation. It also relates to the development of a sustainable coalition of stakeholders, with different interests but equal influence.

**Practice** – This facet relates to the creative and cultural intentions/aspirations of the project/policy. It also relates to its critical reception as a piece of creative practice.

**Profile** – This facet relates to the reputation and future prospects of the professionals and/or organisations involved. It also relates to control over the policy agenda and the ability to promote organisational or personal interests and values.

### Try it yourself:

✓ **First:** break down the aims of your project into: *purpose, process, participation, practice* and *profile*. We found that each of these need to be considered separately in order to fully understand the overall successes and failures of a project. There are fuller descriptions and examples on our website if you need them.

✓ **Next:** consider these aspects against our degrees of success/failure e.g. your process might have been a tolerable failure but your participation was an outright success.

✓ **Then:** map these separate elements onto the wheel of failure. This will give you an overview of all aspects of the project and let you quickly see which aspects of the project need talking about more and possibly learning from.

We have created a grid to help you with this task – there is a downloadable version on our website with the wheel of failure.

|               | Outright Failure | Precarious Failure | Tolerable Failure | Conflicted Success | Resilient Success | Outright Success |
|---------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Purpose       |                  |                    |                   |                    |                   |                  |
| Process       |                  |                    |                   |                    |                   |                  |
| Participation |                  |                    |                   |                    |                   |                  |
| Practice      |                  |                    |                   |                    |                   |                  |
| Profile       |                  |                    |                   |                    |                   |                  |

Together the five facets and six degrees form what we call the wheel of failure. [Find out more about how we have defined each of these degrees.](#) These definitions are intended as a starting point and the key thing is for you and your stakeholders to discuss and agree what the six degrees of success or failure would look like for your project in each of the facets.

This approach should be used at every stage of a project from planning, through consultation with stakeholders to final evaluation. Different stakeholders could complete separate wheels, allowing you to compare and contrast different perspectives on the project.



## 4. Capturing different perspectives

All the stages above can be done individually, with your teams, or in collaboration with a wider group of stakeholders, but the focus of this stage is to reflect on whose voice has not been heard.

### Try it yourself:

Make a list of all the different stakeholders involved in your work. This might include funders, other members of staff, freelance artists, or sub-contractors and of course your audience or participants.

Think about how you currently involve them in each stage of your work from planning to delivery and through to evaluation. Then ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you know what different degrees of success and failure would look like for them?
- How do you provide space to hear their reflections on what works and what doesn't?
- To what extent do your evaluation processes encourage honest critical responses or do they only encourage people to give positive narratives?
- What are the barriers to collecting a broad range of perspectives and narratives about your work?
- What might the value be in doing so?

Next think about those who are not currently involved at different stages and ask yourself, why aren't they involved and how might they be in future?

## 5. Sharing your learning

The number one barrier we found in talking about failures was having the confidence to share them publicly. Yet, our research showed the more we do this, the more others will share, and the more it will become normalised. This is the first step towards creating a culture of social learning where enhancement rather than accountability is the driving factor.

To this end we are encouraging people to share their stories of failure via our website or write failure-based learning case studies for the Centre for Cultural Value.

If you are interested in contributing to either please contact [l.jancovich@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:l.jancovich@leeds.ac.uk).



## About the authors and the project

FailSpace — also known as Cultural Participation: Stories of Success, Histories of Failure — is an AHRC-funded research project exploring how the cultural sector can better recognise, acknowledge and learn from failure, particularly when undertaking work intended to diversify and grow the people who are taking part in subsidised cultural activities. The project is led by Leila Jancovich, with David Stevenson, Lucy Wright, Malaika Cunningham, Lizzie Ridley.

The authors of this guide were Leila Jancovich, David Stevenson and Lizzie Ridley.

Leila is Associate Professor in Cultural Policy and Participation at the University of Leeds and is an Associate Director for the Centre for Cultural Value. Her research focuses on cultural policy, participation, power and decision making.

David is Dean of Arts, Social Sciences and Management and Professor of Cultural Policy and Arts Management at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, and an Associate Director for the Centre for Cultural Value. His research concentrates on questions of cultural participation, specifically focussing on relations of power and the production of value within the UK cultural sector.

Lizzie is a communications specialist and postgraduate researcher at the University of Leeds, and Project Coordinator for the FailSpace project.

**Have you undertaken a similar project?  
What did you learn?**

**Share your reflections and learning with us at [ccv@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ccv@leeds.ac.uk) and we'll  
feed this into future versions of this 'How to...' guide.**

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