

HOW TO FAIL (FORWARD):

A Framework for Fostering
Innovation in the Public Sector



Centre for
Public Impact
A BCG FOUNDATION



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Well before COVID-19 presented local governments with some of the greatest obstacles of the modern era, public institutions across the United States faced issues already rapidly increasing in their complexity and magnitude. Many sought out innovation as a means to address these issues.

While the word “innovation” is often associated with complex experiments that only a handful of people with specialized skills get to participate in, we believe innovation means anything that makes things better for people. At its core, all innovation, from common process improvements to complex experiments, starts with failure. In its most fundamental form, this process entails identifying that something has not gone according to plan (i.e., that a failure occurred) and, learning from that failure (or failing forward). Innovation begins to take shape through the testing and iteration of new ideas to determine what works best — and learning from the things that do not work is as critical as learning from what does.

Despite its importance in the innovation process, learning from failure is very difficult. It is challenging to admit to oneself that a failure occurred and more challenging still to admit it to others. In government, where the stakes are higher and the resources tighter, talking about failures can be an anxiety-inducing, stressful experience. So stressful indeed, that many avoid it whenever possible.

And yet — *failing forward* is critical to a government’s ability to innovate, and therefore, to make things better for people.

With this in mind, this project considers two basic research questions. Why is it so hard to learn from failure in government? What can leaders and their allies do about it?

Methodology

Our findings are principally informed by on-the-ground research with the six local governments, 20 departments, and over 150 public servants who participated in Failure Foundries. These day-long workshops enabled government employees to identify internal challenges to learning from failure and develop action plans to address these challenges. We supplemented this research through interviews with 25 city leaders from all over the country and a literature review on relevant topics, including organizational learning, the psychology of failure, and human learning systems.¹

¹ In particular, much of the early thinking of this project was informed by Amy Edmondson’s instrumental and groundbreaking research in this topic area (Cannon and Edmondson 2005; Edmondson 1999, 2011).

Research findings

We argue that workplace culture is the critical determinant of a government team's ability to learn from failure. Try as we might, we found no silver bullets or simple solutions to promoting learning from failure in local government. Instead, our research revealed four primary opportunities to develop a workplace culture that promotes failing forward in government. This report details how cultural and structural barriers limit failing forward within these four opportunities and proposes potential strategies, largely devised by failure foundry participants, to break down the barriers.



Mindsets & Beliefs

Acknowledge that failures are already occurring in the status quo and view failure as a necessary step towards positive change.

Governments typically operate under the popular adage that failure is not an option. However, this mindset contributes to a deeply embedded fear of failure that discourages those in government from identifying (or acknowledging) problems and from engaging in the experimentation necessary to develop new solutions. Both of these actions are critical to failing forward.

First, governments must accept that failure is already occurring in the status quo, or else they are not likely to improve it. Second, because failure is inherent in the innovation process, public servants must view failures as learning opportunities. Collectively, these two core beliefs can establish a baseline for a government that promotes failing forward: taking stock of what is not working fosters improvements in programs and policies that are already in place. Accepting that failure is part of the innovation process empowers governments to identify failures when they occur, enabling them to safely learn critical information that informs subsequent iterations.



Human Relationships

Foster internal teams and relationships rooted in psychological safety and empowerment across all levels.

Leadership is essential to building a fail forward culture. Leaders have the most critical leverage point to create the kinds of human relationships organizations need to fail forward. As the most visible members of the department, they set the tone and have power to create and enforce structures that maintain this culture. Despite their unique positions, leaders face substantial barriers to realizing their visions. Particularly strong barriers include reshaping a culture after staff had negative experiences with previous leadership, regular turnover that leads to change fatigue, and skeptical middle management. Leaders can attempt to break down these barriers by developing closer relationships with staff built on trust and modeling the behavior they seek to foster, such as being vulnerable about their own failures, providing support and coverage when failures occur, and promoting learning opportunities whenever possible.

Team cohesion is critical to failing forward. Learning from failure is an interpersonal process; it requires questions, honesty, and collaboration to make improvements. Our research revealed that many government teams do not have the psychological safety (e.g., the confidence that one will not face professional or personal retribution if they discuss challenging topics or mistakes) necessary to engage in this process. Working to increase trust within government teams is essential to enabling failing forward.



Systems & Processes

Redesign internal systems and processes to promote identifying, learning from, and taking action about failures.

Sharing power with staff can motivate them and incentivize failing forward. Hierarchical decision-making power in governments can

demotivate and disempower frontline staff from addressing the failures they notice. Frontline staff might know the programs they implement do not work for residents, but without inclusion in decision-making processes they often feel it is ‘not their place’ to raise issues to management. Involving staff from all levels in developing and improving existing policies and programs can help to ensure those with the greatest knowledge of residents’ experiences are empowered to make necessary improvements.

Rebuild performance management processes to promote learning and development. Existing performance management processes are typically designed from the outside-in. Departmental goals are designed to meet externally ascribed metrics (often coming from the state government), and staff is evaluated based on how well they meet individual benchmarks based on these metrics. Such a system diminishes the capacity for failing forward because many metrics do not capture the complexity of government work. This can cause public servants to focus on activities instead of outcomes and prioritize some issues at the expense of others. It also can limit the capacity for holistic learning. Additionally, externally-imposed goalposts can diminish intrinsic employee motivation. When professionals are not able to apply their expertise to define what is most important, they can lose their desire to go the extra mile to affect change. Emerging research in ‘human learning systems’ provides promise for new performance management structures.

Break down silos within and across departments to improve communication and learning. Government silos pose physical and social barriers to failing forward. Many government teams that work on the same topic area or cover the same physical space do not have effective mechanisms to speak with one another if something appears to fail. These physical barriers can reinforce social ones; separate teams can develop animosity or mistrust of others, particularly if they do not understand how each other operates. Developing approaches to poke holes in, rather than completely tear down, these silos (e.g., quarterly meetings for teams that focus on similar challenges or cross-departmental process walks) are essential to promote learning.

Build learning from failure into policy design and organization operations. Despite the ubiquity of failures, government teams do not typically include learning from failure into program design or existing programs and processes. This can make it challenging to identify failures when they occur and to find time to reflect on what is and is not working. To that end, government teams should intentionally weave learning from failures into systems, processes, and programs. This might mean holding group brainstorms to discuss what failure could look like at the beginning of programs, carving out ‘sacred time’ for reflection, or hosting quarterly ‘pivot parties.’



External Ecosystems

Reshape the narrative and ecosystem to be supportive of local government innovation.

Build trust with residents to create opportunities for learning. Public mistrust and low civic engagement have long been challenges for local government. Such distrust can inhibit failing forward because public servants operate with a baseline fear of sparking public outcry. This limits the potential to test out ideas or communicate learnings from things that do not go according to plan. Innovation methodologies that require public servants to meet and test out ideas with the public in low-stakes environments, such as human-centered design, can be helpful paths forward.

Redefine relationships with local media. While local government and the media share an essential partnership in promoting government transparency and public awareness of local issues, pervasive negativity bias can limit government capacity to experiment and learn from failures. Public servants fear that when the media reports on things that do not go well, they are not likely to discuss lessons learned along the way. This diminishes interest in trying new things, and it perpetuates the desire to maintain the status quo. Finding opportunities to bolster learning-oriented narratives in local press might ameliorate these anxieties.

Amend federal and state funding and accountability mechanisms. Many local governments rely on federal and state grant funding for programming. Much of this funding comes with tight accountability mechanisms and little flexibility for experimentation and learning. This forms a major barrier for a local jurisdiction’s ability to fail forward: it simply may not have the budget to try something new. If it does have the budget, accountability mechanisms can cause public servants to try things that are guaranteed to meet certain metrics but may not solve the root problem. While there are no simple solutions to this challenge, federal and state agencies should consider adopting the principle of subsidiarity, in which those with the most proximate local knowledge have the greatest authority in decision-making and spending.

Conclusion and implications for future work

In responding to COVID-19, local governments are innovating at an unprecedented pace. They have proven they are capable of generating new ideas, fostering resident trust, and making a way out of seemingly no way, all at a speed that many — including themselves — thought improbable. Critically, they have shown resilience in the face of ambiguity and high-stress situations, finding new methods to work together across teams, departments, and even jurisdictions. Government leaders must develop cultures to ensure this capacity for innovation sticks beyond the current pandemic.

We hope this research serves as a jumping-off point for the hard work local governments can do to develop the fail forward cultures they seek. Some of the strategies listed in the report might be helpful places to start, and we are eager to support future work — regardless of whether it fails the first time.

About the Centre for Public Impact



While this report focuses on the topic of failing forward, we view it as one part of the Centre for Public Impact (CPI)'s [broader mission](#) to reimagine government so that it works better for all people. At CPI, we aim to support new models of government that embrace complexity, are rooted in positive human relationships in and outside city hall, and foster experimentation and continuous learning. Failing Forward requires the embodiment of each of these elements. CPI is a non-profit foundation established by Boston Consulting Group in 2015.

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About the Center for Urban Innovation at the Aspen Institute



The [Aspen Institute Center for Urban Innovation \(CUI\)](#) is a network hub that catalyzes and supports a broader movement to define values-led approaches to developing, piloting, and regulating urban technologies. We connect city leaders, non-profit organizations, and emerging businesses who believe people deserve cities that promote human flourishing and a digital infrastructure that enhances the experiences and opportunities that city life affords for all residents, particularly those in underserved neighborhoods. Governments have to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes and failures, which are plentiful when it comes to new technologies, in order to build a better future.

This report was designed as a digital experience.

To view, visit failforward.centreforpublicimpact.org

FOREWORD BY MAYOR FRANK SCOTT JR.

The work in this report was conducted prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outcry after the killing of George Floyd and others. But if ever there was a time when the public sector needed to foster innovation, it is now. As we have seen first-hand, government must serve proactively and more nimbly than it has traditionally.

I am proud that several City of Little Rock departments were among those participating in this study. Whether it is addressing public health in a pandemic or picking up solid waste, Little Rock uses data and best practices to make decisions. At the core of all the choices we make (from front-line employees all the way up to the executive staff) is the belief in engaging the public and addressing their needs. As Little Rock changes policies, plans projects, or implements programs, the overarching philosophy is guided by serving our constituents. It can be summed up in the phrase “build nothing for me, without me.”

While this year has seen COVID-19 and the Social Justice movement, last year I was faced with record levels of flooding throughout the City as well as deep budget cuts due to unsustainable financial models I inherited upon taking office. In addition, I created a new position of Chief Education Officer to work with the public, private, and charter schools, which is unprecedented for Little Rock. In the midst of a pandemic, I also announced the single largest economic development project in Little Rock’s history. In short, during my first eighteen months, I have taken on numerous challenges in office from without and within.

What I have seen from all of this is that the public sector has the ability to be cutting-edge. Innovation is a keystone of service, but it involves taking risks. Too often the public sector is risk-averse; instead of risk being rewarded, it is punished. And so we can either be innovative when forced to do so by circumstances, or we can be proactive and progressive. If we react, the situation is done to us. If we take the initiative, we are in command. Though circumstances may be beyond our control, we need not acquiesce. By creating an organization which has learned how to “fail forward” we have the skills necessary to not only be innovative in our daily tasks but also when the next crisis comes our way.

Probably no other profession sees more failure than the arts. The award-winning actor Lupita Nyong’o has said, “It’s only when you risk failure that you discover things. When you play it safe, you’re not expressing the utmost of your human experience.” As you read this report, take Ms. Nyong’o’s words to heart as we all strive to ensure the utmost experiences for our co-workers and the public we serve.



Mayor Frank Scott, Jr.
City of Little Rock
June 2020



WHY “FAIL FORWARD?”

It almost understates the magnitude of the moment to say that municipalities now face the greatest challenges of our era. In our current global pandemic, they must somehow maintain public health, ensure economic and fiscal stability for themselves and their communities, and provide accessible and effective public communications. They must also partner with their communities to create a more just, equitable future for all of their residents. These are no small tasks for organizations that were already beleaguered by budget shortfalls, climate change impacts, and rising inequality (among myriad other problems).

Governments all over the country are failing and will continue to fail in some capacity to address these challenges. This is not because they are deficient in some way, but because failure is inherent in any complex system, and a coordinated response to a global pandemic is about as complex as it gets. If they seek to do best by the people they serve, governments must learn from these failures quickly and with intention.



Unfortunately, learning from failure in government was difficult well before COVID-19 became a global pandemic, and our cities became alight once again with protests against police brutality. Beginning in 2019, our team worked with over 150 public servants in local governments across the country on the sticky, anxiety-inducing topic of failure. When we asked what words they associated with failure, some of the most common responses were “loss,” “shame,” and “waste.” No less than four department leaders politely requested that we change the name of our workshops from “Failure Foundry” to just about anything without the word “failure” in it. Failure might as well be a four-letter word for all of the stress it causes.

However, when we surveyed program participants to understand these feelings better, every respondent felt that failures were very likely to occur in the workplace. Furthermore, all participants believed learning from failure was critical to improving outcomes for residents. We know that, in this uncertain time, these feelings have only strengthened.

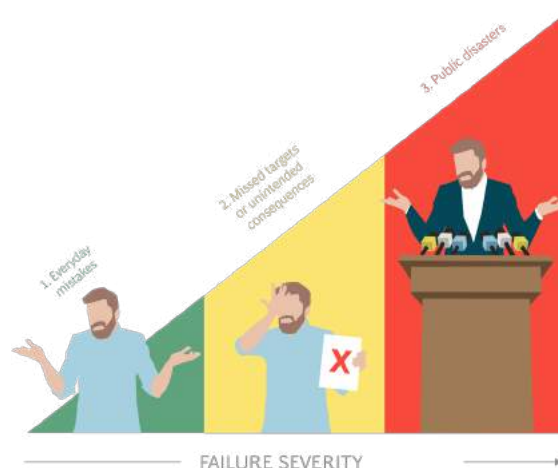
This paradox is emblematic of a core challenge that public institutions face. Failures — defined as what happens when things do not go according to plan — are going to happen, perhaps at a greater pace and scale than in recent memory. Simply looking around at the heartbreak across the country brings many of them in full relief. While they are deeply uncomfortable to discuss

and acknowledge in any context, learning from failures - also known as failing forward - is all the more critical in this pandemic-centric, uneasy world.

But if governments want to make, and continue to make, good on their mission to serve the public, they must start somewhere. We believe that all innovations begin with failures. Most often, innovation is viewed as the output of some complex experiment or pilot. We define it a bit differently and believe that innovation is the process of making things better. This might mean more effectively providing food access for recently-out-of-work families or leveraging new micromobility technologies to make public transportation more equitable.

Regardless of the degree of complexity, the innovation process begins when an individual or team notices things are not going according to plan and tests out different ideas to address the problem. Learning from failures along the way is key to finding the best solutions.

Failures exist on a spectrum of severity (Cannon and Edmondson 2004). At one end of the spectrum are the avoidable, everyday mistakes that individual public servants make. Slightly more severe are the experiments and pilot programs that do not meet desired targets or have unwanted side-effects. All too commonly, failures are long-standing policies or programs that both do not achieve desired outcomes and do not change over time. At their worst, failures are massive public disasters that reduce government legitimacy and public trust.



This report focuses on the anxiety-provoking topic of failure because learning from failure is fundamental to the innovation process. We also chose to focus on failure because, while there is plenty of research and momentum behind ‘failing fast’ and ‘failing often’ in business, the literature comes up short when it comes to government. We hope that this report successfully explores the conditions that can create the kind of safe learning and experimentation that is appropriate and necessary for local government. We do so by considering two central challenges. Drawing on our experience working with six local governments, we first investigate why it is so difficult for those in local government to learn from failures. Second, we consider what department leaders can do to build the conditions in which they and their teams can fail forward.

What does failing forward look like?

Failing forward is a multi-step process.* First, a public servant (or several) must identify that a failure has occurred. Second, they discuss this failure with peers or supervisors, and next, they work to understand why the failure occurred. Finally, they take action to address the failure.

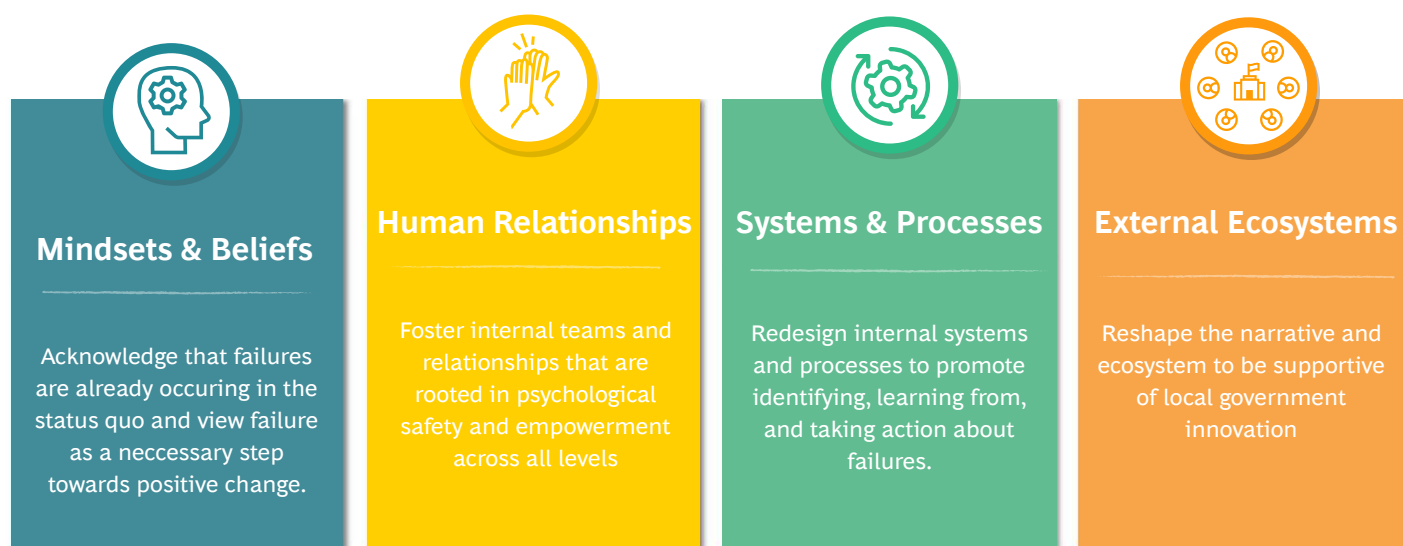
*Note that this is an adaptation of Cannon and Edmondson’s 3-step process to learning from failure (Cannon and Edmondson 2005).



While core innovation methods and skills, like human-centered design, help facilitate this process, our team’s experience working with dozens of local governments across the world has shown us that culture is critical for failing forward to stick. When departments in local government view failures as learning opportunities, they can identify, discuss, and learn from problems because they can talk about failures with honesty and empathy. They can use this knowledge to take action because they have the intention, space, and time to use critical knowledge to inform future work.

Local governments face considerable cultural and systemic barriers to creating and supporting this culture. Our research revealed four primary opportunities to promote failing forward in government. This report explores the barriers that make it difficult to see these opportunities through and presents strategies governments can adopt to overcome them. As with any complex system, there are no simple

answers to creating an organization that fails forward, but we believe that making changes within these four elements is an important place to start.



While each of these elements is critical to failing forward, some play a larger role than others. In particular, government leaders — whether they be department directors, mayors, or county executives — are the linchpins to establishing the baseline values and creating environments that foster learning from failure. The values themselves are similarly critical: in order to make a change, public servants must first believe that failures are already present within the status quo and are essential learning opportunities to make things better. Without leadership to advocate for and develop structures to sustain these beliefs over time, governments are not likely to have the cultures that they need to fail forward.

A note about the research methodology

Five core sources informed this report. We first read key literature on organizational learning, innovation, and the psychology of failure, detailed in full in the 'Works Cited' section. Much of our early thinking on this topic was shaped by the invaluable work of Amy Edmondson (Cannon and Edmondson 2005; Edmondson 1999; 2011). We then interviewed 25 city leaders all over the country about their experiences with failure and their hopes for how their organizations might improve going forward.

The bulk of our findings were informed by the six local governments, 20 departments, and over 150 public servants who participated in our Failure Foundries. Participating governments included: Washington, DC; Kansas City, MO; Little Rock, AR; King County, WA; Seattle, WA; and Dallas, TX. Departments spanned a wide range of jurisdictions, from Municipal Courts to Departments of Parks and Recreation to Information Technology. Staff at all levels of seniority from each department attended, including department directors, middle managers, and frontline employees.

In each Failure Foundry, departments participated in a three-step process in which they identified the top barriers that prevent them from failing forward, brainstormed ideas to overcome those barriers, and ultimately developed two to three concrete action plans to implement the highest priority solutions. Each Failure Foundry was tailored to the departments' needs through pre-work surveys and interviews with department leadership and staff. All data from the pre-work interviews and surveys, as well as from the Foundries, has been anonymized.

We are grateful for the vulnerability, honesty, and graciousness that all interviewees, failure foundry participants, and all other public servants provided to this project. It is important to recognize that each department is unique and solutions always must be tailored to local context. However, we hope that this report provides inspiration for steps local governments can take to create cultures of innovation that permit the critical process of failing forward.



MINDSETS & BELIEFS

“Government can’t afford to fail.” All too often, we hear this response when someone optimistically dares to opine on the potential for innovation to create better government. This perspective is not entirely wrong. However, while the ‘fail fast’ ethos has been a key to success for many of the world’s most innovative companies, government cannot run like a business. It is critical that governments minimize disruption to the programs, policies, and products that maintain the backbone of residents’ basic safety and daily routines.

However, this sentiment contributes to a fear of failure that discourages those in government from identifying (or acknowledging) problems and from engaging in the experimentation necessary to develop new solutions. To overcome the prevailing fear of failure, public servants must embrace two critical mindset shifts. First, they must accept that failure is already happening in the status quo. Second, they must view failure as a learning opportunity, rather than an endpoint. Embracing these beliefs is core to an organization that promotes failing forward.

Accept failure is already happening

“Senior officers and supervisors [always] repeat the saying: ‘That’s the way we’ve been doing it, that’s the way we are going to keep doing it.’”

-Failure Foundry Participant

In government, as in any complex system, failures are not just simply likely to happen — they are already happening all the time. It would be ludicrous to think otherwise.

Of course, local government workers already know this. Ninety-five percent of Failure Foundry participants surveyed believe failures are likely or very likely to occur in their workplace. However, we found that the temporality of the failure determines the extent to which teams acknowledge and discuss it. A “new” failure that occurs as a result of some attempted novel innovation attracts significant, sometimes disproportionate, negative attention within and outside government. An “old” or existing failure that occurs in the course of the “the way we’ve always done it” barely seems to register as a failure at all. As one Failure Foundry participant described it, although they work in a “forward-leaning office,” there are “change-averse pockets of people who tend to manipulate the core values of the office as a shield against change.”

95%

of Failure Foundry participants believe failures are likely or very likely to occur in their workplace

“There are change-averse pockets of people who tend to manipulate the core values of the office as a shield against change”

Failure Foundry participant

Reactions to both “old” and “new” failures reinforce the status quo and discourage innovation in local government. However, ignoring “old” failures can be particularly pernicious, as residual failures have a habit of adding up. As Harvard University Professor Amy Edmondson has documented in her groundbreaking research on the space shuttle Challenger, this is precisely the type of environment where small failures can turn into large disasters (Edmondson et al. 2005). It’s the difference between a train not being on time and a train derailing, as tragically happened in New York City in 2017 (Santora and Fitzsimmons 2017)

Frontline employees in local government have the best understanding of the problems in existing programs and processes. However, they are often left out of innovation-specific activities, which are typically considered to be highly specialized. In order to drive a mindset shift that encourages the identification and acknowledgment of failures in the status quo, government leaders must dispel the myth that innovation only applies to new experiments.

Narrowly focusing on novel solutions siloes innovation in the hands of the few, as it reinforces to frontline workers that innovation is not their job. However, all public servants should want and feel able to make things better (i.e., to innovate). This is particularly true as the systems, processes, and programs they operate within and implement affect their daily life.

When improvement is also recognized as innovation, identifying and fixing existing failures in the status quo becomes more important, and everyone from leadership to the frontline contributes. Government leadership can both implicitly and explicitly encourage the identification and communication of failures in the status quo by formally ‘celebrating’ learning from failure in group meetings or placing environmental cues, such as inspirational posters with ‘failure’ quotes around the office. Subtle and direct messaging makes staff consciously aware that learning from failures of all kinds is not only valued in the workplace, but a core part of innovation.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Host “Innovation Accelerators” to encourage staff at all levels to find and develop solutions to ‘failures’ within the status quo

- 8-Week ‘courses’ in which staff take stock of existing systems and processes, discern one or two that they believe need fixing, and provide training and resources to make a change. This both enables staff to make relevant improvements and provides a tangible way to reinforce otherwise intangible ‘belief’ statements.

Establish clear moments and ‘psychologically safe’ methods to identify failures throughout policy/initiative implementation and operation (not just at the end of a 3-year cycle)

- Potential options include delegating a specific “what we could do better” component to monthly meetings or quarterly ‘midi-looks’ to evaluate successes and failures. These specific blocks to reflect on existing programs can enable a more clear-eyed reflection on the status quo.

Evaluate success and failures of all current programming by a ‘fail forward’ committee

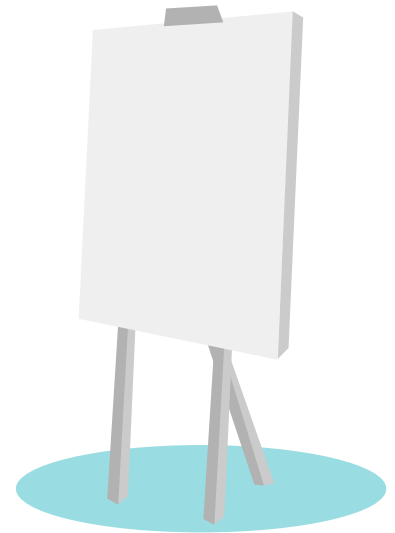
- Create a task force of staff at all levels of the hierarchy to make a list of all existing external programs and internal processes, conduct interviews with other members of the department to determine what is and is not working, and make recommendations for improvement. Democratizing this process can empower more public servants to find failures within the status quo while providing diverse perspectives.

View failure as a learning opportunity, not an endpoint

“People are weary from too much change that they do not see sustained.”

-Failure Foundry Participant

One Failure Foundry department spent the morning session in an animated discussion about how the adversarial relationship – and resulting negative coverage – with their local newspaper was a key reason they couldn't fail forward in the way they wanted to. However, when it came time to voice solutions – crickets. The team simply did not believe that the status quo could be disrupted. Awkward silence remained until the department director broke through the mental blockade by putting forth a simple question to the team: “why don't we just try?”



This seemingly simple question is very fraught in practice. Any new endeavor comes with a risk of failure. No one, in any sector, nor their personal life, likes to fail. However, it's not just a fear of failure that prevents initiatives from getting off the ground. Many experienced workers in local government have witnessed first-hand the challenges of trying to institute change within a system where seemingly all structures and processes feel designed to prevent disruption to the status quo. For them, it's not just a fear of failure, but also a well-earned weariness of having their time wasted yet again. In their past experiences, failure was viewed as final. A Failure Foundry Chief Innovation Officer, said it best, “We all know what typically happens in government when we try something different and it fails. We believe we have lost the opportunity to try again. And in some cases, we stop trying to change at all.”

“We all know what typically happens in government when we try something different and it fails. We believe we have lost the opportunity to try again. And in some cases we stop trying to change at all”

Failure Foundry Chief Innovation Officer

But innovation isn't an outcome. Instead, it is a process in which public servants identify problems and try out new ideas to address them. Much like the first sacrificial pancake that nearly always ends up misshapen or burnt, these ideas often fail the first time (Sáles-Griffin 2015). They require multiple iterations and an enduring commitment to learn from failures until they succeed. As Grace Simrall, Chief of Civic Innovation and Technology, Louisville, KY, told us, when it comes to the mindsets and beliefs necessary to build a ‘fail forward’ culture, governments need to recognize that “once you've completed your due diligence, failure is something that can be celebrated as long as you're learning from it.”

Department leaders can reinforce this message in several ways. They might celebrate “fail forward moments” in team-wide communications, recognize innovative team members through formal “fail forward” competitions, or perhaps hold team get-togethers that celebrate the learnings that result from failures. Activities like these help counteract our natural proclivities to shy away from talking about failures and provide clear structures to incentivize learning across all levels.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

‘Phoenix award’ for translating learning from failure to action

- Named after the mythological bird that is reborn from its own ashes, this award celebrates a public servant who successfully regenerated learning from something that did not go according to plan to improve existing or future work. This can incentivize learning and bolsters its cultural value within the department.

Host a Mission Launch Party focusing on innovation and failure

- Include “innovation” in department vision and mission statements. Explain leadership's understanding of what innovation means at a ‘launch party’ that celebrates learning. By creating an enjoyable, celebratory environment, leaders can publicize these values in a low-stakes but memorable way.



HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Translating the mindsets and beliefs discussed in the previous section into action requires far more than just accepting them as fact. After all, what are beliefs without people to live them out?

It is one step for a public servant to acknowledge internally that there are substantial failures in the status quo and that change is possible. But to actually do something about these failures, people must feel able to talk about problems and try new things without risking embarrassment or retribution from their colleagues. Governments that fail forward have human relationships rooted in psychological safety at all levels: from leadership down to teams on the frontline.

The COVID-19 pandemic — and its devastating effect on public sector budgets — has caused major strain on local governments' interpersonal dynamics. Given the increasingly uncertain and chaotic environment that governments now operate in, there is an increased likelihood of failures in responding to the pandemic and social unrest, which can further exacerbate these troublesome dynamics. If leaders aim to learn from failure in this new world, it is more important than ever that they bolster psychological safety.

Leadership is essential to building a fail forward culture

“I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't failed - and failed majorly - throughout my career. That learning is how you grow.”

-David Noguera, Director of Housing, Dallas, TX

At each Failure Foundry, we asked department directors to kick off the day by sharing a story about a time that they learned from failure, either professional or personal. We heard stories about large and small failures, from public reprimands and policy misfires to early-career job losses as D.J.s and entrepreneurs. We also learned about the different ways leaders built resilience, developed empathy for themselves and others, and applied new knowledge to make positive change.

We asked department leaders to do this for two key reasons. First, we found that it helped break the ice around “failure” as a topic of conversation. These stories, about a concept typically associated with “getting fired,” received belly laughs and sympathetic nods. More importantly, they set a safe tone for the day: by modeling the behaviors they sought to promote, directors empowered staff to be vulnerable and talk about failures themselves.



47%

of Failure Foundry participants only sometimes or rarely discuss mistakes and failures with their co-workers

Leaders have the most substantial leverage point to create the kinds of human relationships departments need to fail forward. As the most visible members of the department, leaders set the tone for their team's culture and have the power to create and enforce structures that maintain this culture.

Despite this unique position, department leaders face considerable barriers to cultivating environments where public servants are able to fail forward. Far too many struggle to overcome them. Indeed, fifty percent of Failure Foundry participants (across all staff levels) report they only “sometimes or rarely share failures or mistakes with supervisors or department directors.” This can be particularly detrimental to an organization's capacity to learn, as it means those with the greatest power to address failures might not know that they are occurring. Our research revealed three key barriers leaders face in promoting fail forward cultures.

First, negative experiences with previous leadership can cause traumas that linger strongly in institutional memory (Schyns and Schilling 2012; Webster, Brough & Daly 2014). One department director described his experience as “inheriting a culture of fear, shame, over-accountability” in which the department's “flight or fight is out of whack.” Despite his best efforts, this director found it to be very challenging to “empower” his staff to “feel like their ideas matter when they are afraid of getting anything wrong.” Building the safe relationships necessary to fail forward is a particularly steep uphill climb if the long-standing culture is rooted in fear.

Second, many government departments experience regular re-organization or revolving doors of leadership. For example, in two of the cities that participated in the Failure Foundries, at least two departments had seen three leadership changes in just a few years. As a result, many staff have had to work with various leaders in quick succession, which can cause change fatigue and delays in adjusting to new leadership styles and values (Morgan 2001). It can also make it harder to build the psychological safety necessary for staff to trust the new leadership will stick around and be supportive when failures happen (Edmondson 1999).

Finally, leaders' values and ambitions must be reinforced by all leadership along the chain of command. Middle managers have the unique capacity to create perceptions of “organizational justice” — that is, to shape teams in a way that feels fair both procedurally and interpersonally (Morgan et al. 1996). They, therefore, serve as guardians to a leader's fail forward vision. Many Failure Foundry participants experienced guardianship that was too tight: one felt that supervisors “hold failures against you if it becomes convenient for them to do so;” others found that suggestions for improvements are taken “personally,” which decreases motivation to make them at all. Though this is by no means a universal experience, viewing middle management as an enabler of fail forward thinking is critical for leadership.

Leaders are best able to overcome these barriers by “walking the talk” and modeling the behaviors they hope to see replicated. This can mean demonstrating vulnerability by sharing their own failures, protecting their staff from external admonishment, and being inquisitive (e.g., asking questions, publicly testing ideas for feedback) (Cannon and Edmondson 2005). These actions let staff know failing forward is important and encouraged and establishes the tone and cultural codes for team dynamics down the chain of command.



SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Dedicate one bi-annual or quarterly ‘all-hands’ event to failing forward, with a directorial keynote focused on his/her/their own experiences with failure.

- Many government departments host department-wide events bi-annually or quarterly. Directors can lead one entire session about their own experiences from failure and why they think it is important for their staff to fail forward. By kicking off the day with personal experiences, leaders can promote vulnerability and set the tone for a session rooted in candor, honesty, and growth.

Expand opportunities for department directors to engage with frontline staff (e.g., attend smaller team meetings or host virtual, casual lunches with staff)

- Directors can ensure staff actually hear their messaging by creating “face-time” with staff that typically do not have access to senior leadership. Informal engagement allows for more time to discuss values, motivate staff, and develop psychological safety.

Directors include failing forward section in departmental newsletters

- In regular departmental communications, leaders can draft a section about what the department learned that month or quarter. This codifies and amplifies learning while normalizing discussion about failure.

Team cohesion is critical to failing forward

“I believe there is a ‘gotcha’ culture where team members are constantly walking on eggshells and looking over their shoulders, fearing the constant threat of being called out for mistakes and errors from colleagues [and] management. There seems to be deep-rooted feelings of CYA throughout the organization. This limits our abilities to innovate and take chances.”

-Failure Foundry Participant



Talking about failures is uncomfortable. It is hard enough to admit to yourself you’ve made a mistake or avoidable error — let alone to share it with a team member or supervisor. It can be even harder to point out others’ mistakes. Perhaps it is most anxiety-inducing to draw attention to a broader system’s collective failures. This is particularly true in government, where the stakes feel higher: failures can affect many people — often neighbors — and public scrutiny can make the word ‘failure’ feel taboo even to say out loud.

The problem with these natural feelings is that failing forward cannot be done alone. Rather, it is a team sport that requires staff to ask each other questions, seek feedback, and candidly discuss unexpected errors or outcomes (Edmondson 1999). This level of candor and vulnerability requires deep psychological safety.

However, it is challenging to build psychological safety in any team, let alone in government, where the stakes are higher and the resources are tighter. Self-protection is a natural instinct, and, as individuals, we dislike talking about failures more than we enjoy celebrating our successes (Edmondson 2011; Kahneman 2011). The risk of embarrassment or professional retribution can form a negative feedback loop: the more that one person holds back from being vulnerable, the more that others feel pressure to do the same.



Our research in Failure Foundries demonstrated the substantial scale of this feedback loop in local government: forty-seven percent of participants said that they only sometimes or rarely discuss mistakes and failures with their co-workers. One participant cited an overarching “fear of conflict and confrontation” that kept them from “talking about problems and trying new things.” Another Failure Foundry participant described their team as having an “empathy” gap that results in regular “frustration and stalemates.” These experiences reflect what we found to be a self-preservation mentality in teams: to maintain their standing at work, staff do not feel able to identify mistakes or learn from failures publicly. This means that even more failures are likely to occur (Cannon and Edmondson 2004).

A psychologically safe, innovative team is not one with lax expectations; rather, it’s an environment with high standards (Pisano 2019). Because staff feel able to make improvements without interpersonal risk, discussions about failure are not seen as personal attacks, but instead as imperative steps forward. On psychologically safe teams, individuals can be themselves and assume empathetic responses when they need help. Such authenticity enables failing forward: it’s not that public servants do less because they feel

safe, but rather that they feel motivated to do better because they know they can seek help (Haloudis 2019; Brown 2019). The connection between interpersonal trust and staff motivation might seem intuitive, but developing and sustaining such trust will likely require a [reimagining](#) of how governments create and nurture their operations.

Government staff typically do not have access to the kinds of budgets or time-allotments for “team-building” that other sectors use to help staff connect with one another. Basic social connections necessary for psychological safety, therefore, can take longer to develop – or do not develop at all. One Failure Foundry department epitomized this experience. Despite a staff size of only 12 people, half of the team had not engaged on a personal level with the other half, which limited their capacity to talk about failures as a team. When we asked participants how they would like to get to know each other better, their suggestions were not expensive, convoluted team-building endeavors. Rather, they were the basic ways that most people, in any sector, develop relationships with their colleagues: “a game of kickball in spring,” a “happy-hour once in a while.” These “solutions” came up in almost every single Failure Foundry, signifying an under-investment in team building in local government more broadly.

This challenge has only increased as many government teams shift to remote work during the COVID-19 crisis. Without a physical water cooler to form connections, leaders and team members will have to be creative in finding ways to build psychological safety, trust, and genuine connection. Though challenging, this also poses an opportunity for a fresh start. Virtual chat rooms can connect staff who previously worked in different physical spaces or felt too sheepish to speak in person. Office “happy hours,” now taking place online, would not need to come out of office budgets. Staff who otherwise could not find access to mentors on their team can find new ways to develop relationships. Whatever form these relationships develop — virtual or, eventually, in-person - they will be enormously helpful in building the psychological safety that public servants will need to fail forward in this challenging time and beyond.

50%
of Failure Foundry
participants only
sometimes or rarely
share failures or mistakes
with supervisors or
department directors.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

Mentoring programs with senior and junior staff, rewarded with certificates

- Pairing newer staff with more experienced ones can foster relationships within teams that might have otherwise experienced social divisions. Certification programs can ensure that mentor-pairs actually spend time together and develop specific fail forward skills predetermined by the certification program.

Monthly, virtual “Learning from Failure” Lunch and Learns

- Monthly lunches can provide staff opportunities for informal relationship building. Topical conversations about specific failures can de-personalize mistakes and errors, and build psychological safety in discussing difficult topics.

Host a monthly social event and rotate responsibility each month

- Virtual events — such as online games — can bring levity to after-work hours and provide avenues for social connection. By rotating hosting responsibility, both senior and more junior staff can be empowered to develop stronger team dynamics.



SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

Beliefs and relationships might be core to failing forward, but they can easily fade without structures and processes to reinforce them. Organizational behavior is shaped by routines, or the procedures and conventions that determine how people spend their time (Leavitt and March 1988). Failing forward happens best when learning from failure is built explicitly into these routines. When conventions and procedures are designed to maximize continuous learning, rather than just successful delivery, governments can empower more staff to identify failures, can communicate better, and have the time and space to grow.

Shared power can motivate staff and incentivize failing forward

“I do not believe that anyone who has the power to make a change and incorporate a new idea will listen.”

-Failure Foundry Participant

One Failure Foundry participant's experience illuminates how her department's power-sharing structures diminish an organization's capacity to fail forward. As a frontline social worker, she can see how government programs are working or not working for residents in real-time. Despite her extensive experience, she was not involved in crafting the original policy she currently implements, nor is she involved in any meetings to evaluate the policy more broadly. After years of operating within this structure, she doesn't feel like it is her job, or even her "place," to speak up when she sees problems on the ground.



Her story is far from unique. The public sector is notoriously hierarchical: who gets to make and inform decisions is largely determined by seniority (Henry 2013). We heard from public servants all over the country that this structure could cause staff to view themselves solely as executors of predetermined policies. As one Failure Foundry participant described the problem, "Some people shut down when they don't feel they are listened to and included, and that leads to even more failures." Furthermore, jobs in government are highly formalized: roles are typically very specific and defined by predetermined rules and procedures. Most focus is placed on managers' accountability in light of external regulations — not on systems improvement or innovation (Chen and Bozeman 2012; Rainey 2003). Collectively, this disempowers staff and limits the whole organization's ability to learn from failure.

By contrast, in “empowered organizations,” power, or the ability to make decisions that affect outcomes, is shared more widely with people who have extensive experiential knowledge, not just those with managerial authority (Centre for Public Impact 2019). Waste collectors could provide meaningful input on new routes and schedules. Copy-writers can guide frameworks about internal communications structures. Parole officers can co-create a system of check-ins that feel more true to their understanding of parolees’ needs. With influencing power comes greater ownership: each of these staff members would have the responsibility to ensure that the innovations are successful (ibid). In Failure Foundries, we saw how valuable these perspectives were: when given the opportunity, frontline staff actively sought to participate in systems-improvements activities, and their insight was crucial to ensuring that the activities would actually work. They were also the most excited to get started.

Sharing power not only gives staff agency over the broad arcs of their work but also over their day-to-day lives, ultimately motivating them to improve the systems around them (Vogt and Murrell 1990; Keller and Dansereau 1995). In this structure, identifying, communicating about, and doing something about failures is everyone’s job, not just that of senior management. This bolsters the capacity for learning from failure: when staff are seen as partners of the organization, they do their part to ensure that the organization improves (Centre for Public Impact 2019).

COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to reshape and rebuild power structures. Already, governments are operating differently out of necessity. Quick and authoritative judgments have sidelined the cumbersome approval systems that previously guided decision making. Those that worked on the ground during the crisis will undoubtedly know best about how to rebuild going forward. Informing policy with their insight by involving them in decision-making, changing performance management structures to bolster organizational improvement efforts, and incentivizing problem sharing can not only empower more public servants to fail forward on COVID-19 responses, but it will also likely enable continuous learning going forward.



SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Include one staff member from each level of seniority at decision-making meetings

- Making a conscious effort to include frontline and middle-management perspectives into meetings not only provides more holistic perspectives, but it also provides staff with greater ownership over the issues that will impact their daily lives.

Create department-wide incentives program for staff to try new solutions to problems that they have identified

- Incentive programs can ‘gamify’ innovation, reducing the stakes and promoting the idea that solutions must be tested, rather than perfect the first time. Providing nominal rewards can inspire more staff at all levels to get involved (and perhaps even spark healthy, casual competition).

“How can we expect our staff to even consider learning from failure when we are finally released from a court-ordered mandate to meet our numbers?”

-Failure Foundry Department Director

One Failure Foundry department spent a good deal of time exploring the root cause of low employee motivation to develop solutions for problems. After an extensive discussion, they decided that a key reason was the performance management structure, which did not measure learning, progress, or efforts to improve the broader organization. When we got to ‘ideation,’ however, the person responsible for performance management within the department put her foot down and shared that amending this system was out of her hands. She was responsible for ensuring that evaluations happened, but it was the folks in city hall that determine what would actually be evaluated. Despite collective agreement that this system was a critical barrier to failing forward, we would have to find a different area to address.



This example is the norm in government. Typically, performance management structures are designed as individual benchmarks that enable the broader department to meet externally ascribed goals and metrics. These metrics are generally established by institutions that determine access to funding and other resources, such as elected bodies, state government agencies, or even consent-decree holding courts. The prevailing reasoning behind this process is that it promotes accountability for the spending of public funds and motivates innovation because local agencies have latitude in how they meet these metrics (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). This system is so widely practiced in government that academics typically refer to it as the “external accountability regime” (Jakobsen et al. 2017).

Typically, performance management structures are designed as **individual benchmarks** that enable the broader department to meet **externally ascribed goals and metrics**.

Such “regimes” can have several unexpected, deleterious impacts on governments’ ability to fail forward. Firstly, many metrics do not embody the complexity of the tasks at hand, causing public servants to prioritize some issues at the expense of others (Jakobsen et al. 2017). For example, a TANF recipient might have been quickly placed in a new job (thereby meeting predetermined metrics of timeliness and placement), but in moving so quickly, the case manager might not ensure that the resident has adequate support to stay employed over time. The public servant might have succeeded in meeting the required metrics, but they have likely failed to fulfill the needs of the resident (ibid). However, because this interaction was considered a success in the “numbers,” the case manager and the agency as a whole are not likely to learn about what could have gone differently to ensure better outcomes for the resident.

Secondly, externally-imposed goalposts can diminish intrinsic employee motivation (Jakobsen et al. 2017). Public servants are typically motivated internally both by their enjoyment of the tasks at hand and by a service-driven desire to contribute to society (Perry, Mesch and Paarlberg 2006). When all metrics used to evaluate success are externally determined, we not only diminish public servant agency and professionalism; we also demotivate the most driven public servants, which can reduce the system’s efficacy as a whole (O’Riordan 2013; Jakobsen et al. 2017). These metrics are often considered in the binary of ‘successful/unsuccessful,’ which leaves little room for individual motivation to innovate. As one Failure Foundry participant described it, overarching “pressure applied to perform perfectly” makes it difficult to “embrace experimentation and work towards iterative change.” If every structure around an employee suggests that the expectations are to follow direct orders and meet external standards, how can we expect the average employee to maintain an innovative mindset for long? Even the most skilled managers and growth-mindset focused leaders will struggle to overcome these rigid, external standards (Dweck 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of this challenge, early research into “human learning systems” and “emergent learning models” have posed exciting avenues for change (Chatopadhyay 2019). Most problems that public servants aim to address are complex, and the management practices that support them must enable practitioners to navigate the ambiguity of their work – not just assume that a specific path or answer is necessarily best (Wilson et al. 2020). This also democratizes the ability to learn — many who have not had the same latitude to fail given historic workplace prejudices (e.g., racial minorities) – experience the same, codified expectations for learning as all staff. Finally, opportunities to discuss not just whether or not programs are succeeding, but also how well they function operationally can help institutionalize and normalize learning



(Wilson and Lowe 2018). Ultimately, the literature on this topic is exciting and new, and we are eager to hear what might work (and what might fail) from practitioners across the country.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Include adaptive and flexible language in performance management evaluations

- Because complex environments are dynamic and constantly changing, performance management evaluations should not be tied to specific outcomes, but rather with how staff dealt with new information, changing stakeholders, and evolving contexts.

Enable staff to set their own goals as part of performance management evaluations.

- Given the connections between self-determination and employee motivation, allowing staff to set their own goals based on their professional expertise could promote higher staff drive and ownership over tasks and duties.

Break down silos within and across departments to improve communication and learning

“We are highly dependent upon other ‘servicing’ departments. [We need] to figure out a way to bridge collaborative gaps and create a less siloed city-organization.”

-Failure Foundry Participant

Even if staff feel empowered to make changes, they can face substantial physical and social barriers to doing so. One Foundry participant, a Parks and Recreation maintenance worker, epitomized this challenge. He’s worked at the same park for years, but he has never met the landscape engineer who designs its maintenance plan. When he notices a design failure, he faces several physical barriers to improving the problem together, such as limited email access and no transportation option to discuss the issue in-person. He also faces social barriers: given that they have no prior relationship, the



maintenance worker does not know if the engineer would be open to discussing an on-the-ground failure. He may not even know who is the right engineer to talk to. More often than not, the maintenance worker does not communicate the failure, and instead uses a workaround to continue to do his job as best he can (Alter 2014).

In complex city ecosystems, most problems are horizontal, stretching across multiple teams and departments who serve the same set of residents or physical spaces. However, government operations are too often limited to vertical silos that restrict the capacity for knowledge-sharing and collaboration, as this example demonstrates (OECD 2010). Frustrations or tenuous relationships can diminish interpersonal trust within and across departments over time: we heard over and over again in Failure Foundries that the real problems lay in other departments. Already, many departments and teams operate under the assumption that other organizations are “actively working to conceal their failures,” which limits the baseline trust and assumption of good will necessary to learn together (Desai, Maslach & Masden, 2017). In short, physical barriers can develop into social ones that are even more difficult to penetrate.

Furthermore, research shows that we learn well when external parties provide feedback (Ancona and Caldwell 1992). This can help us see where our second-nature routines fall short and enable clearer-eyed perspectives of existing programs and newer, more exciting innovations. Additionally, despite ubiquitous ‘best practice’ articles, conventions, and websites, some studies show that we learn more from other people’s failures than from their successes (Diwas, Staats, and Gino 2014). To that end, each time that we share failures widely, we maximize a whole government system’s potential to improve. Clear avenues of communication and collaboration between teams and departments that have different day-to-day activities are, therefore, critical to making the most of failing forward.

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Governments must find new ways to break down silos. Although completely redesigning government departments’ structure may seem laborious and time-consuming, there are several different ways to poke holes in, rather than completely break down silos. Departments can host quarterly meetings for staff who work on similar topics to discuss issues, or invite different departments to “process-walks” where they share helpful information about internal systems or processes. [Openness](#) is the best way to allow the free flow of ideas and inspiration, and these kinds of activities build psychological safety and open channels of communication that can lead to future collaborative learning.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Host regular ‘open-house process walks’ for teams to understand how other divisions and departments operate, focusing on collaboration opportunities

- Open house process walks provide external teams and departments the opportunity to better understand how partner organizations work. By explaining the range of functionalities and chains of command, departments can diminish other groups’ previously held operational frustrations while enabling stronger communication and collaboration.

Facilitate virtual meet-and-greets for departments or intra-departmental staff with overlapping focus areas

- Leadership can identify areas where different departments or teams are working on the same topic area or serving similar populations and create opportunities for staff to both get to know and discuss challenges with each other. This builds psychological safety as well as space for knowledge sharing and collective problem identification.

Build learning from failure into policy design and organization operations

“Too many competing demands and emergent issues that create barriers to having the time for thinking through and implementing effective steps toward change.” “TIME!!!” “We don’t have the time.”

“Not enough time.”

-Failure Foundry Participants



When we asked Foundry participants what their biggest barrier to learning from failure was, the single most common answer was a lack of time and space to identify and talk about problems. Having time to implement new learnings seemed like a laughable, distant dream.

75%

of Failure Foundry participants only sometimes or rarely have the time to identify or understand why failures occur

We heard from many Failure Foundry participants that working in government can sometimes feel like playing a “whack-a-mole,” with a never-ending parade of emergencies requiring attention. Indeed, seventy-five percent of Failure Foundry participants said that they only sometimes or rarely have the time to identify or understand why failures occur. This manifests in a range of ways — the political pull of City Councils or Mayors Offices can mean that directors are called away from offices at the last minute for an indefinite amount of time. Frontline staff are confronted by residents who have come to the government as a “last resort,” requiring an all-hands-on-deck, time-intensive response. Though these “fires” rightly take precedence, they often take up time that might otherwise be spent considering whether the fires themselves are caused by existing failures in policies, programs, or processes.

Surely not every second of every workday is spent fighting fires; rather, the lack of intentional time and space means that time is rarely made for learning. Indeed, one Failure Foundry participant cited a key barrier to failing forward is the “perception that we do not have the time,” indicating a self-perpetuating cycle of de-prioritizing reflection and learning.

How teams spend their time is indeed a reflection of their priorities. In local government, learning from failure often is not a priority; rather, it is often perceived as a luxury (Crosbie 2019). There can be an overarching sentiment that those with the time to learn get to do so; those with the budgets are able to do so. That failure is rarely explicitly defined or planned for in the design of new initiatives or during the implementation of existing ones only exacerbates this dynamic.

Without considering what failure might look like, it can be hard to identify failures when they occur. This is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that fifty-two percent of Failure Foundry participants reported that they only rarely or sometimes notice mistakes and failures at work. As one Failure Foundry participant explained it, because his team does not “forecast what could go wrong [or] have plans in place to adjust,” new initiatives are started “with little notice, done the way [they were] last time.” In this case, lacking intentionality of considering failure at the outset leads to repeatable, avoidable failures. This is not to say that one can be expected to correctly predict what failures will look like. Rather, by internally defining undesired outcomes at the outset, a government team can better evaluate how new programs or processes are progressing after implementation has begun.

52%

of Failure Foundry participants only rarely or sometimes notice mistakes at work

Together, lack of intentionality to include learning from failure in both how time is structured and how programs are designed contributes to a collective attention bias, in which attention is not paid to the smaller, less noticeable problems and mistakes, but only on the larger “failures” that cannot evade discussion. Avoiding these smaller problems can ultimately result in stagnating process and performance — and worse outcomes for residents (Cannon and Edmondson 2005). At worst, it can result in human disasters, such as the Challenger explosion referenced earlier (Edmondson 1999).



To address this challenge, teams must optimize their [operations for learning](#), rather than just delivery and control (Brown 2019). This might mean building in mandatory time for reflection and evaluation — quarterly “pivot parties,” for example, are a great way to do so. It could mean hosting a brainstorming session every time a new policy begins, in which all relevant parties collectively define what failure might look like at the outset. Activities such as these generate greater awareness about failure and can make it more psychologically safe for staff to raise concerns and red flags, and subsequently, for the whole team to adjust along the way.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Establish quarterly ‘pivot parties’ to identify failures within newer projects and develop improvement strategies

- Mandatory meetings designed to identify areas for improvement are explicit times for ‘collective reflection,’ rather than for status updates. When staff know that they are accountable for identifying and addressing problems on a quarterly basis, they might be more focused on doing so during the ‘down’ months.

Create “sacred time” blocks for reflection and development

- Specific allocations of time devoted to introspection and analysis — rather than program execution and management — can allow for better breakthroughs in insight. By ensuring that all staff are able to schedule these time blocks, they become culturally self-enforced.



EXTERNAL ECOSYSTEM



Government clearly does not exist in a vacuum. It serves its constituency, and it characteristically does so by partnering with social and private sector groups and residents (Klijn 2012). However, the ecosystem surrounding government operates with a negativity bias — the assumption that government can't do anything well, validated by extra scrutiny on failures and reinforced by minimal attention on successes (Patterson 2002). Essential sources of funding from the federal and state government reflect this negativity — tight scrutiny over spending privileges accountability over autonomy and limits capacity for home-grown innovation.

Although most of this report has been focused on the internal levers that governments can pull to fail forward better, this final section tackles how government departments can redefine their relationships with residents, local media, and other levels of governments. We argue that, by promoting greater trust within the ecosystem, governments will have not only more information about how to improve but also the grace to do better.

Build trust with residents to create opportunities

“In the 1990s, a Planner administratively approved a tennis court that was maybe 3 feet too large. Neighbors were angry about this mistake, and this story has stayed with us for 30 years. Due to the public scrutiny, additional steps were added to the process, which increased the amount of time for project review. What’s worse, though, is that even though just a few of us were there when this happened, it continues to impact our entire culture. The public outrage was so bad that everyone is afraid to try new things - even a little bit!”

-Failure Foundry Participant

It has long been remarked by presidents and political scientists alike that the “government is us,” but it doesn’t always feel that way. Despite the fact that most of us rely on myriad government services to maintain our modern quality of life, most people only notice government when something goes wrong. Combine the inherent negativity bias we all are susceptible to, with long-running, popular narratives that paint governments as inept, and what you get are many residents who view the local government bureaucracy with mistrust.



Despite this deeply rooted mistrust — which is rightfully more concentrated in historically discriminated-against groups — residents are essential to failing forward. As the primary end-users of policies and initiatives, they have the best understanding of why things are not working and what needs to change to make them effective going forward (Ilott and Norris 2015). To make this process actually happen, however, local governments must make a more concerted effort to engage communities, not just when it's easy - when policies and programs are going well - but also when it's hard - when government is coming up short and tensions with the public might be high.

Residents largely contact local government when they have some kind of issue or challenge: a court date, a need for housing support, a plot of overgrown land that must be dealt with. These engagements can be tense and stressful, even for the most seasoned public servants. As one Failure Foundry participant explained, it's "hard to share what you've learned when [residents] are screaming at you." Regular experiences such as these can disincentivize public servants from seeking any engagement with the public at all.



This means that governments operate within a closed-by-default environment, in which departments minimize transparency to avoid criticism and blowback. This is seen most clearly in how government departments typically roll out new programs, products, and policies, which all too often include little to no input from residents. Ultimately, this poses a much larger risk of failure in the long run. By neglecting to engage the public for fear of experiencing a small failure (e.g., a policy proposal that receives public push-back), governments can ultimately create policies that simply do not work for people. Conversely, when innovation is done right, residents are treated not as end-users, but, rather, as [co-creators of the policies that affect them](#). This builds trust with the public and can make government feel more [human](#).

This process is no easy feat: public engagement has long been a seemingly intractable civic challenge. However, COVID-19 perhaps best exemplifies the potential of greater government engagement; resident trust levels in local government have dramatically increased since the pandemic began (Edelman 2020). Protests in the Spring demonstrated just how tenuous the strength of that trust can be. Not only do governments need more faith in local institutions than ever, but they will also rely on residents to best understand how to support their complex needs in the face of a global pandemic. One promising approach that many cities across the country pursue is human-centered design, which recognizes that residents have the best understanding of the problems facing their communities and possess critical knowledge about how to tackle them. Public engagement of this kind can build a more legitimate and trusted government with a greater margin for the failures that will inevitably come when local governments try to drive change.

When innovation is done right, residents are treated not as end users, but rather as co-creators of the policies that affect them.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Partner with your city's Chief Innovation Officer (or equivalent position) to conduct human-centered design trainings.

- Many cities have dedicated leadership positions to promote innovation across all government departments (e.g., Chief Innovation Officers, Performance Managers). They are responsible for helping other departments develop their innovation capacities, typically by promoting new models of resident engagement. Greater utilization of this resource can help departments learn low-cost, low-stakes strategies to test residents' perspectives and get feedback on new ideas and existing programs.

Host departmental 'Ask Me Anything' conversations (AMAs) on online platforms.

- Promoting greater visibility for unique departments can provide a 'face' to the name of some of the more anonymous parts of government bureaucracy. By hosting an online forum focused on engagement, rather than just garnering feedback, departments can begin to humanize staff, build trust, and sharpen their understanding of resident perspectives.

Redefine relationship with local media

“Media doesn’t care about how we maintain the status quo - but they will always ask ‘did it work?’ when we try new things.”

-Chief Innovation Officer



Local media and local government often work in tandem to raise public awareness about pressing issues in the community. While national legacy publications might dedicate the entirety of front pages to national politics, city papers provide residents a greater understanding of their neighborhoods and neighbors’ needs. Moreover, government and media partnerships are typically successful at promoting greater public understanding of government operations, involving the public in policy decisions, and promoting accountability (Balkin 1999). That local newspapers face substantial financial trouble (to put it lightly) in light of COVID-19 is troublesome not only for these institutions themselves, but in promoting transparency and engagement across an entire local ecosystem (Hendrickson 2020).

With that said, negativity bias about government in the media is well documented (Moy and Pfau 2000; Capella and Jameison 1997). It seems that reporters are better able to find the mistakes and failures than they are at covering successful programs. The impact of this bias extends beyond shaping resident perceptions about government; it can also influence the inner-workings of government itself (Hjarvard 2008).

“[Public servants] know they need to try new things. [But they are] gun-shy because they’ve been burned by media reports that have tried to say we are doing a bad job or that [they] don’t care.”

City Leader

Our research found that negative media coverage diminishes government capacity for innovation and experimentation because public servants fear losing control of the narratives about their work. They worry that if an innovation fails, the public will not have the full context about what went wrong and will lose trust in government overall. One city leader explained his experience with this challenge by explaining that, while public servants in his city “know they need to try new things,” they are “gun-shy because they’ve been burned by media reports that have tried to say we are doing a bad job or that [they] don’t care.” If history shows that trying new things means that you only get burned in the press, why try?

This fear of losing control of the narratives around failures is typically exacerbated by the fact that elected officials have high visibility in promoting new initiatives. One government official shared that the local newspaper keeps a list of everything that a new mayor promises and constantly probes to determine if it was successful. Low trust that the media will cover these initiatives generously can cause governments to reduce the degree of openness they share with the local reporters, ultimately diminishing the margin for experimentation. This can damage the relationship between media and government: operating in the “closed by default” manner discussed in the previous section can reduce interpersonal trust and bolster antagonism.

Conversely, we heard from city leaders across the country that the media does not typically cover the “status quo” — or, the standard, everyday policies and programs that governments have been implementing for decades. Retaining tried-and-true processes whenever possible, therefore, is a win-win: it does not affect the public profile or pose any reputational risk. This ultimately inhibits government’s capacity to point out failures in the status quo, which we previously discussed was critical to improving outcomes for residents.

Therefore, local governments face the twin challenges of both sustaining critical relationships with their media allies in the face of financial woes and needing to reshape public narratives around government learning. To do so, governments can attempt to be more forthcoming about failures by pitching specific stories about what they have learned from prior missteps. They can also work to humanize otherwise anonymous bureaucratic departments by inviting local media to community events, thereby providing faces to the names that might otherwise be demonized in the press. Regardless of the path forward, working to view media as partners in facilitating failing forward, rather than barriers, will be key to engendering public support and creating margin for improvement.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

Pitch a “learning from failure” story to local beat reporters

- Rather than waiting for reporters to hear about failures and report them as such, leaders can pitch stories focused on what the department learned in the process of testing new ideas. This would help both shape the narrative about learning from failure and develop more human relationships with the local press.

Invite beat reporters to community events to humanize staff

- When departments host community events (e.g., public health awareness campaigns, public works completion ceremonies), leaders can directly reach out to the local press and personally ensure that they meet the staff responsible for holding the events. This can help develop relationships with reporters and staff and provide greater opportunity to discuss what works and what has been learned.

Proactively share leader stories to develop a relationship with reporters

- Leaders can diminish negativity bias in the media by sharing positive stories with beat reporters. This might neutralize some negative coverage and bolster public awareness of successful government work.

Amend Federal and state funding and accountability mechanisms

**“No resources to allow for testing of new ideas.
All projects have to be budget neutral.”**

-Failure Foundry Participant



In most every city and county that we worked with, public servants cited the challenge of rigid state and federal funding as a key barrier to failing forward. Traditionally, this is one of the rare barriers that is both incredibly important and largely outside of the local government’s control. COVID-19, however, has accelerated new opportunities for local authority and ownership.

For the last several years, the concept of an emerging “Metropolitan Revolution” or “New Localism” has gained popularity: responsibility for addressing some of the world’s hardest challenges, which were formerly the Federal Government’s domain now being pushed to cities and counties (Katz, B. and Bradley, J. 2013). Emergencies like COVID-19 have historically presented opportunities for local governments to meet these challenges. For example, in response to the 2008 Great Recession, the American Recovery Act (2009) provided local and state governments with spending flexibility on education, workforce development training, and transportation infrastructure (GAO 2011). This enabled the jurisdictions with the greatest understanding of local needs the ability to serve residents in ways most suitable to their contexts. This principle, called subsidiarity, pushes authority to where the knowledge, expertise, and wisdom sit — rather than carrying information to where authority sits (Centre for Public Impact 2019). It is widely practiced in other countries, such as Germany, and is considered an effective principle in combating COVID-19 (Taylor 2006; Havelka 2020).

Just in the last few months, fiscal emergencies triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a shift towards flexible funding and subsidiarity in other sectors.

Just in the last few months, fiscal emergencies triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a shift towards flexible funding and subsidiarity in other sectors. For example, in the non-profit sector, many of the U.S.'s most endowed foundations made a “commitment to more flexible funding to help grantee partners meet emergency needs” (Ford Foundation 2020) This work builds on previous efforts to promote trust-based philanthropy, which is based on the idea that grantees know best how to achieve their goals in their extremely complex environments (Whitman Foundation, 2020).

An increasing number of social care systems around the world adopted this principle well before COVID-19. As our team at CPI has documented, [Buurtzorg](#), a home-care organization in the Netherlands, places decision-making almost exclusively on the frontline and avoids all forms of central management, leading to a more financially sustainable care model with happier patients and empowered nurses (Ćirković 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic provides

an opportunity ripe for increased subsidiarity: local governments not only have had to step up amid a passive federal response, but they also experience the fall out of the virus in very different ways and so require different paths to recovery.

Unfortunately, the greater responsibility of local governments has not been matched by the necessary budget increases. This means that, for the foreseeable future, cities and counties will continue to be reliant on other levels of government to fund critical services. At the time of this report's publication, state and federal governments do not appear to be loosening existing accountability measures or restrictions. Cities are, therefore, likely to face this pandemic without the spending autonomy they need.

State and federal funds support services that promote municipal residents' basic health and safety, so there is clear value in national standards accountability. However, focusing on centralized control and metrics in this way can have pernicious side effects in local jurisdictions, including hyper-focus on meeting specific targets instead of considering holistic outcomes; a lack of frontline empowerment; and a “use it or lose it” mentality where money must be spent regardless how well current programming achieves goals. All of this culminates in an environment where failure and learning do not feel like viable options for those on the frontlines in local government, leading to wasted money and poorer outcomes — the very thing the rules were designed to avoid.

There are no easy answers to this problem, as changing these dynamics would require structural reform across the entire federal system. However, policymakers can look to past experiences with more flexible funding, such as the Recovery Act of 2009 or other countries and sectors for inspiration and evidence of what can be achieved when greater autonomy is given to authorities with the most local knowledge.



LET'S FAIL FORWARD

In responding to COVID-19, local governments have managed to innovate at a pace previously considered unthinkable. They have demonstrated that they are capable of more flexible decision making and proven that they are able to build greater public trust. They have successfully worked quickly across departments to craft and enforce policies that keep residents safe. The magnitude of this newly complex environment, while daunting, also makes us optimistic about the potential to reimagine local government to better serve residents. Ongoing protests against police brutality further demonstrate both the need and the potential for this reimagining. A whole slate of external unknowns has both opened the floor for new failures and incredible improvements.

To carry these developments forward, governments must now focus on the cultures that underpin the work they do. Leaders must engender and sustain the values and psychological safety that enables failing forward across the entire complex ecosystem of government: within teams, across departments, up and down seniority levels, and with the public. They can begin by instilling and maintaining the mindset that failure is inevitable, and learning from it is critical. To ensure this learning actually happens, they must foster the interpersonal trust that allows public servants to quickly and safely identify problems with one another, empower frontline staff to utilize their expertise, and build new systems and processes that enable discussions and reflections focused on improvement, not just accountability. Building an external ecosystem that trusts governments to make the most of the unexpected and provides grace when things do not go perfectly will bolster these internal changes. In sum, leaders must develop cultures and systems that will enable learning, not just control. We believe our four point framework can be an excellent jumping off point to get there:



Mindsets & Beliefs

Acknowledge that failures are already occurring in the status quo and view failure as a necessary step towards positive change.



Human Relationships

Foster internal teams and relationships that are rooted in psychological safety and empowerment across all levels



Systems & Processes

Redesign internal systems and processes to promote identifying, learning from, and taking action about failures.



External Ecosystems

Reshape the narrative and ecosystem to be supportive of local government innovation

The path forward is both complex and exhilarating. We hope that some of the strategies listed can spark ideas that might be adapted and applied to your unique contexts, and we encourage you to fail forward along the way.

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Many of the ideas behind this paper emerged from numerous interviews with practitioners, scholars, and experts. They are listed below in alphabetical order. Importantly, while these interviews were instrumental in shaping our thinking, we do not assume that the interviewees would necessarily agree with each argument made in this paper — although we certainly hope they do. We are grateful for their perspectives and for their generosity of time and ideas. This work would not have been possible without their dedication.

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