Fact sheet

Reframing failures as opportunities to learn

A psychologically safe workplace enables people to feel safe to report errors, mistakes, accidents or potential problems affecting work. The sooner these are known, the quicker they can be acted on, fixed or impact minimised. In a psychologically safe workplace, reporting problems, accidents and errors is seen as a good catch, appreciated and can be used to learn and improve.

What we commonly see as simply 'failures' and mistakes offer us opportunities to see where we could:

- Improve processes.
- Put in better training.
- Spot changes in the environment we need to respond to.
- Drop a project that is not working, before we invest too much.

We genuinely want things to succeed, so when things don't go well, we might feel reluctant to highlight this and focus on this. We also don't want to hide 'failures'. Promote being pro-learning. Reward when mistakes are acknowledged, reported and learnings gained. Avoid blaming and shaming. Encourage thinking about how we can move forward with more knowledge.

Keep in mind:

- We are all human and can make mistakes. We can't know everything.
- We can't control everything.
- We can't predict the future.
- Increases in complexity and interdependence in workplaces means more 'moving parts' that can go wrong.

How effective teams view 'failure'

Effective teams see 'failures' as a natural part of the learning and development process. They know that you very rarely get things perfect on the first attempt.

If people are encouraged to share their experiences so everyone can learn, you'll see more open discussion, faster learning, fewer repeated problems and innovative solutions.

Reframing attitudes to getting it wrong

Unhelpful	Helpful
We need to prevent failure	We want to know early and learn from things going wrong
Failure is unacceptable	Doing new things means we'll make some wrong turns
If you're effective you don't fail	To be effective you need to be able to learn from mistakes and share those learnings
We can't afford to fail	We can't afford not to learn and change

Common causes of things going wrong or unexpected results	Shortcomings in behaviour, skill or attention (e.g. not following processes or procedures)	Unexpected combination of event and actions in a complex or changeable environment (e.g. systems failure such as travel delays due to engine failure)	Moving into a new area, market or responding to change – trying something new (e.g. introduction of new product has low sales)
Productive responses	Training Retraining Process improvement System redesign Sanction if repeated or serious	Analysis of failure/ issue from all perspectives Identify risk factors to address system improvement	Analysis of results to work out implications Brainstorm new ideas or solutions Design next steps Start a new solution from what you learnt

WORKING WELL

Mental Health Foundation
OF NEW ZEALAND
mauri tū, mauri ora