



**Creativity, Entrepreneurship, and Organizations of the Future Conference**  
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Speaker: Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School

Title: Mapping the Failure Landscape: Process Deviations, System Breakdowns and Unsuccessful Trials as Sources of Improvement, Problem Solving and Innovation in Teams

Abstract:

This paper explores the scope and meaning of failure as an essential element of both creativity and learning in organizations. Many managers subscribe to the idea that organizations should avoid failures, but if they occur, they should learn from them. Learning from failure generally requires effective teamwork to diagnose causes of failures, prevent their recurrence, or generate novel approaches. However, fruitful learning does not occur when failures are ignored, denied, or misunderstood, as is often the case in organizations. First, substantial prior work has documented social and psychological barriers to learning from failure in teams and organizations. Most important, when managers believe (tacitly or explicitly) that failure is unacceptable, productive discussion of it is unlikely to occur. Not only does this belief inhibit learning, it originates in a faulty assumption, notably the idea that failure is in fact avoidable in organizations -- an assumption that is easily challenged. Second, we lack adequate concepts and categories with which to understand the full range and implications of organizational failures. I thus propose preliminary categories and frameworks to address this gap. In so doing, I explore the varied meaning of failures in three organizational contexts -- routine operations, complex operations, and research -- to suggest strategies for fostering organizational improvement, problem solving and innovation.