

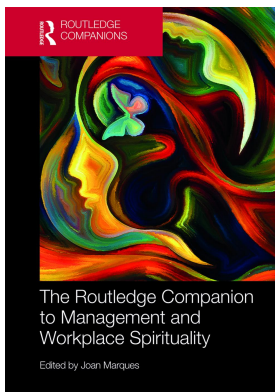
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On: 22 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality

Joan Marques

A Spirituality of Imperfection

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351015110-7>

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Published online on: 11 Mar 2019

How to cite :- Andrew Morris, Céleste Grimard, Dylan Cooper, Cynthia Sherman. 11 Mar 2019, *A Spirituality of Imperfection from: The Routledge Companion to Management and Workplace Spirituality* Routledge

Accessed on: 22 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351015110-7>

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6

A SPIRITUALITY OF IMPERFECTION

Recognizing and Rewarding Intelligent Failure¹

*Andrew Morris, Céleste Grimard,
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Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time.

(George Bernard Shaw)

It's not the note you play that's the wrong note—it's the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong.

(Miles Davis)

There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth: not going all the way, and not starting.

(Buddha (or as Yogi Berra might put it—when you come to a fork in the road, take it))

Introduction

A recent *New York Times* editorial (Reische, 2017) lamented the fact that modern technology was taking away the ability of students to make mistakes (stupid or otherwise) without life-long consequences. Implied was the notion that youth (age) should be given more room to experiment, to try foolish things, to make mistakes, and to not let these mistakes become “scarlet letters” that forever brand individuals as failures. However, in living hyperactive public lives through social media, college students are trying on concepts, ideas, and beliefs that may carry long-term repercussions. This is neither fair nor helpful for creating life-long learners. Without room to fail, youth may succumb to a version of perfectionism that harms their capacity for learning and creativity, both now and in the future.

What is true for youth might also be true for organizational leaders: “When driven by the fear of failure, leaders are unable to take reasonable risks. They limit themselves to tried and proven pathways” (Sanborn, 2015, p. 1). Organizational leaders face a rapidly changing business environment in increasingly complex organizations. As demands to make effective and profitable decisions increase and as the stakes rise, leaders confront intense pressures to make wise and

intelligent choices. Yet, failure and mistakes are likely in uncertain and complex environments; indeed, they are inevitable (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Since mistakes can cost people their jobs and organizations their viability, leaders may be tempted to choose options that are adequate but not optimal. Perpetual satisficing grows into a pathway to mediocracy. As such, a central challenge of leaders is motivating themselves and others to take appropriate risks. The key to doing so is to recognize and reward *intelligent* failure, as argued by Sitkin (1992), Bock (2015), Edmondson (2011), and others. For example, Bock (2015) considers Google's ability to encourage and reward calculated risk taking to have been critical to its success. Simply put, Google rewards both process and outcomes and, in so doing, has created a culture that encourages risk-taking. Similarly, within a few high tech companies the phrase "Fail Fast, Fail Cheap, Move On" has become a slogan for how the company approaches new product development.

This chapter applies the concept of the "spirituality of imperfection" to helping employees and leaders grow more comfortable with learning from failure. This conceptualization of spirituality invites readers to accept imperfection and failure not as limitations but as a path toward being more fully human. In the sections below, we explore the concept of *intelligent* failure and how it differs from *failure*. In describing the benefits of intelligent failure, we provide examples from organizations that are designing for intelligent failure. We then ground this idea of intelligent failure in a framework of the spirituality of imperfection. Finally, we explore how companies can begin to build cultures that make intelligent failure more likely.

Intelligent Failure

The term "intelligent failure" was coined by Duke University professor of management Sim Sitkin (1992). According to Sitkin (p. 243), intelligent failures have five characteristics:

- (1) they result from thoughtfully planned actions that
- (2) have uncertain outcomes and
- (3) are of modest scale, (4) are executed and responded to with alacrity, and (5) take place in domains that are familiar enough to permit effective learning.

A critical difference between intelligent failure and *bad* failure is the extent to which the individual or organization learned something as a result of the failure. All failures are not created equal; failures that provide valuable information are inherently more helpful than failures that do not. As such, managers should not overlook mistakes and praise or reward those who are incompetent, sloppy, inaccurate, or imprecise. Intelligent failure is not like T-ball where every child gets a trophy.

In his examination of learning from failure, Sitkin (1992) concludes that a successful learning culture must accept that intelligent failures are an important component of learning. Numerous factors drive organizational failure. For example, organizational failure may occur as a result of employee deviance or inattention, poor leadership, poor processes, excessive process complexity, and environmental uncertainty (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). Such failures are particularly *bad* when they involve routine processes with predictable outcomes (Sitkin, 1992); in other words, when they could have easily been prevented. On the other hand, *good* failures occur with complex processes and high uncertainty. Such failures represent intelligent failures, because they can help an organization learn what works and what does not work. The discovery of drugs, a trial and error process that is capital intensive, lengthy, and fraught with the possibility of failure, is an appropriate example of intelligent failure. It is only through high-throughput screening and multiple clinical trials that variants are eliminated and new medicines are created (Warren, 2011).

In her highly engaging article, “Strategies for learning from failure,” Amy Edmondson (2011) developed a spectrum of failures ranging from the worst to the intelligent. The worst (*bad*) failures are preventable failures in predictable operations. As Edmondson (p. 51) states:

They usually involve deviations from spec in the closely defined processes of high-volume or routine operations in manufacturing and services. With proper training and support, employees can follow those processes consistently. When they do not, deviance, inattention, or lack of ability is usually the reason. But in such cases, the causes can be readily identified and solutions developed.

For example, while examining eggs for defects and cleanliness, an egg processing plant employee may be distracted by a loud sound behind the conveyor belt and, as a result, allow eggs coated in contaminants to be included on the processing line.

Next on Edmondson’s (2011) spectrum are unavoidable failures in complex systems. These situations are characterized by novelty, non-routine processes, and extenuating circumstances. Some job contexts in which these types of failures may occur include healthcare professionals in hospital emergency rooms, soldiers in battle, and teachers in their first classrooms. Even if workers follow best practices for safety and risk management, small process failures may occur. Often, disasters are caused by a series of small failures that occur within a short period or occur in a particular sequence. To prevent disasters, workers need to feel they will be supported—not stigmatized—when they report small failures with equipment, systems, or procedures while it is possible to address and correct them, rather than waiting until a true crisis—or disaster—occurs.

Lastly, Edmondson identifies what she refers to as intelligent failures at the frontier. These failures occur within the context of innovative research (biotechnology, aerospace, etc.). Edmondson (2011, p. 53) considers these to be *good* failures that occur in environments where “answers are not knowable in advance because this exact situation hasn’t been encountered before and perhaps never will be again.” Intelligent failures are to be expected in companies working to create a new vaccine or build a new type of aircraft or vehicle. In these situations, good work involves good experimentation, and it is always hoped that the failures produced by good experimentation will be quick and decisive. If this is the case, the failures will prevent the organization from sinking more time, money, and other resources into unproductive work.

Benefits of Failure

Accepting failure and learning from it is easier said than done. Failure is anathema: we are afraid of it, we avoid it, and we penalize it (Dahlin, Chuang, & Roulet, 2018; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999). Indeed, people spend enormous amounts of time and energy and employ any number of biases and heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) to avoid admitting failure. Few people want to stand up in front of a group, no matter how big or small, and admit that they made a mistake.

Part of the problem is that failure is seen as a waste of time, money, or other resources. Another part is that people fear being labeled as lacking in judgment or incompetent and, thus, putting their careers in jeopardy. Thus, organizational members may be loath to ask for information and advice. Theory on information networks and advice seeking posits that the perceived social costs of asking for assistance play an important role in determining who is asked for help (Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Nebus, 2006), and that many organizational members resist seeking advice altogether due to fears of appearing incompetent, incurring social debts, or otherwise losing social status (Blau, 1955; Lee, 2002). For example, in two experiments, participants

expected others to see them as less competent if they asked for advice in either a work-related vignette or an experimental task and, consequently, refrained from doing so when they believed that others' perceptions would affect their outcomes (Brooks, Gino, & Schweitzer, 2015). Field studies have similarly found that organizational members seek advice from higher status others and avoid seeking advice from lower status others, which the researchers attribute to concerns related to sacrificing social position and expending social capital (Agneessens & Wittek, 2012; Lazega, Mounier, Snijders, & Tubaro, 2012). These fears represent a substantial barrier to building a culture that supports intelligent failure, because unwillingness to seek information and advice reduces the ability to learn when things go wrong, locking organizations into bad failure. Yet, we can learn much from failure (Lehrer, 2009). Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) suggest that a closer look at failure reveals that repeated failing could have positive consequences, especially at the individual level. Navy SEALs, for example, redefine failure as an opportunity to identify a weakness, to learn, and to grow. There may be several mechanisms that produce these positive consequences. Frequent failing could trigger regular sense making and increased skill in doing so. In addition, frequent failing may trigger experiences with closure: people who fail to learn the lessons of closure are vulnerable when bad experiences occur. Their feeling is one of, "I can't handle this, it will never end, and I've got to escape it." In their research, Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) found that SEALs react differently to instances of failure. Their thinking appears to be: "I'm afraid of failure because I didn't prepare well. I'm not afraid of failure if I did the best I could ... and learned from it." Finally, frequent failing could also change the character of individual SEALs through a mechanism referred to as "the continuity of experience." Every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts. In SEALs training, every experience of failing happens to a slightly "different" person. It is not just durable traits that matter in dealing with failure. It is also "who" encounters that second, third, and fourth failure. The SEALs in Weick and Sutcliffe's study demonstrated that they can be both attentive to failure but not become immobilized by the potential repercussions of failing (or succeeding).

Aside from enabling individuals to grow as human beings and to become more competent, intelligent failure helps organizations move toward improved future performance (Edmondson, 2011). This is especially likely when new situations are encountered and established procedures or approaches do not work. In these cases, experimentation and intelligent failure are essential for organizations to learn and become more resilient. "Where success can foster decreased search and attention, increased complacency, risk-aversion, and maladaptive homogeneity, modest levels of failure can promote a willingness to take risks and foster resilience-enhancing experimentation" (Sitkin, 1992, p. 237). Thus, failures can signal the existence of problems to be resolved, motivate organizations to adapt and stimulate action, increase openness to taking risks, and increase organizational flexibility in their responses to their environments (Sitkin, 1992).

A Spirituality of Imperfection

Spirituality has been defined as a search for meaning and connection to others (Mitroff & Denton, 1999), and spirituality at work implies workers engaging in tasks that help to create meaning in their lives and connection with community (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Several recent studies have demonstrated the positive impact that spirituality can have on businesses and business leaders. For example, Singh, Corner, and Pavlovich (2016) found that spirituality (defined as an awareness of a greater force or power beyond the individual self) affected entrepreneurs' experience of venture failure. In essence, they found that spirituality helped entrepreneurs better manage failure, and, somewhat surprisingly, venture failure helped deepen their spirituality. A number of authors have also examined the role that workplace spirituality may

have on learning in the workplace (Gatling, 2015; Howard, 2002). The relationship appears to be a positive one such that workplace spirituality is positively associated with learning.

The nature of personal spirituality is paradox, and the core paradox that underlies spirituality is a haunting sense of incompleteness—of somehow being unfinished. In many ways, this paradox and its resulting expression lies at the heart of Maslow's (1943) conceptualization of the need for self-actualization. Maslow conceived of self-actualization as an ongoing, never-ending process of realizing our potential through peak experiences. Similarly ongoing and open-ended, spirituality is more at home with questions than answers, and we discover it not by being told what to do but by engaging in creating meaning for ourselves. The ancient Greeks first used the concept of "spiritual" to distinguish and contrast between material and non-material things. In other words, spirituality was originally considered to be beyond the material, beyond possession, beyond the confines of the self. One experienced it but could not see, touch, possess, or command it. Indeed, the Greeks thought of spirituality as always being beyond our control. Spiritual growth involves becoming more *complete* and finding a fit between the self and one's reality outside self. It is not interested in explanations and techniques but rather a vision for living that celebrates experience and choice. Spiritual growth involves finding individual answers to the question, "How am I to live—usefully and in completion?" Thus it is not exclusive, dogmatic, or authority driven but open minded and questioning.

The term "spirituality of imperfection" was created by Seelaus (1998) in reference to St. Teresa of Avila who faced numerous challenges in her life and learned to accept herself as imperfect but, nevertheless, *worthy*. As Clarke (1976, p. 174) suggests,

Her lack of illusions in regard to what it is to be human, allows her to come to such freedom that she can assign her imperfections no more importance than they deserve. She awakens to the truth that God is not concerned about the limitations of being human, but about love.

Thus, Seelaus proposes that a spirituality of imperfection:

is not "anything goes" or "what you see is what you get." Rather, it is the simple admission that, in spite of our best efforts, we all fall short. But as long as the heart is intent on loving, our failures are not the issue.

Kurtz and Ketcham (1992) develop this notion of the spirituality of imperfection in their book of this title. In their book, they quote Francis T. Vincent, Jr., a former Major League Baseball Commissioner who says:

Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often—those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players (.333 average). I also find it fascinating that baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth.

Like baseball, a spirituality of imperfection teaches us that failure is indeed the norm in life: errors are part of life's "rigorous truth." A spirituality of imperfection involves seeing ourselves as we really are and then discovering that it is only within our imperfections that we

can find the peace and serenity that is available to us. In other words, a spirituality of imperfection does not offer a set of rules or an ideology claiming a greater truth, but rather it presents a vision celebrating experience and choice (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). It recognizes that our imperfection, mistakes, and failures can be a wound that permits growth and development to occur, and that to deny imperfection is to disown oneself, for to be human is to be imperfect. A spirituality of imperfection is rooted and revealed by uncertainties, inadequacies, helplessness, and a lack of control. It offers a context and suggests a way of living in which we endure our imperfections and use them to teach us. It suggests that our successes can be our failures and our failures our successes if we learn and grow from them. Or, as the Buddha teaches, our spirituality flowers when we understand that something is awry, that something is wrong with us.

A spirituality of imperfection begins as a cry for help but it develops as a way of living with our humanness. It urges us to accept imperfections as imperfections because this acceptance is necessary if we are to develop a vision of life and a way of living that can be endured and lived creatively. Thus, a spirituality of imperfection helps us understand that there are no guarantees in life, and life must be lived as *life* not as a goal. We must neither lose heart when things go badly nor become cocky when things go well since our failures and imperfections assure us that we must continue to toil and struggle. In paradox, the struggle itself develops our virtue and lets us know that we are spiritually alive.

Rohr (2011) suggests that too many of us spend too much of our lives seeking answers to questions like, “What makes me significant?” or “How can I support myself?” From this perspective, success is defined as material gain. Rohr argues that it is only when we begin to pay attention to our failures, especially the invaluable lessons that they hold, and seek integrity within the task we do that we move into a more complete life. He writes (p. 76),

Failure and suffering are the great equalizers and levelers among humans... There is a strange and even wonderful communion in real human pain, actually much more than in joy, which is often manufactured and passing. In one sense, failure's effects are not passing, and the pain of falling short is less commonly manufactured ... if we are lucky many of us discover in times of such falling the Great Divine Gaze, the ultimate I-Thou relationship.

Thus, a spirituality of imperfection is well illustrated by the analogy of the sinner being closer to the divine than the saint. Each time we fail (sin), we cut a string connecting us to the divine. But the divine ties it up again making a knot, thereby bringing us just a little closer. Each failure makes the string a bit shorter, and each knot draws us closer and closer (Stuart, 2013). Development of a spirituality of imperfection is a search for reality, for honesty, for true speaking and true thinking. It is to reject self-deception and to live a more examined and conscious life. It is to begin to see ourselves as we are: mixed up, incomplete, limited, and flawed.

At the individual level, practicing a spirituality of imperfection is likely to enhance individual humility. Accepting imperfection allows us to see our shortcomings and, in so doing, allows us to ask for help, which is a key dimension of leader humility (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005). Interestingly, research by Owens and Hekman (2016) indicate that a leader's humility can enhance team performance by creating an emergent “spirit” that enhances psychological safety which allows the team to strive to achieve its highest potential. And, more broadly, humility was a core characteristic of level 5 leaders, the most effective leaders in Collins' (2001) research of 1400 Fortune 500 companies.

How to Develop Intelligent Failure

Given the foregoing discussion, we should encourage organizational leaders to create cultures that allow for intelligent failure through the development of a spirituality of imperfection. In their review of the opportunities, motivation, and ability to learn from failure, Dahlin et al. (2018) suggest that the keys to improved learning from failure are psychological safety and non-hierarchical environments with good communication and coordination within and between organizational parts. Simply put, leaders and organizations with a punitive attitude toward failure learn less from failures (intelligent or otherwise) because organizational members consider the cost of reporting failure to be too high. In this section, we explore how organizational leaders can create organizational cultures that promote psychological safety and failure reporting.

Researchers suggest there are specific ways to design an organization so that the organization and its members are more likely to experience intelligent failure (Bock, 2015; McGrath, 2011; Sitkin, 1992). First, they propose that actions be carefully planned and that success and failure be defined upfront so that if things go wrong, they will have a better understanding of the underlying causes. Second, failures should be managed quickly so that very little time elapses between outcomes and their interpretation. Third, formal mechanisms should be developed to share what was learned. The organization should develop ways to quickly, honestly, and completely disseminate information. These “After Action Reports” capture intent of the activity, what happened, why it happened, what was learned, and how the next activity will incorporate the new data.

These actions are particularly important when the activity is complex and uncertain. Dahlin et al. (2018) report that complex problems provide greater opportunities to learn since they appear to trigger faster and more efficient learning. Specifically, complex problems offer more venues for learning and counteract simplified cause and effect analyses. Evidence suggests that organizations often blame individual operators rather than try to find true failure causes. The tendency to play the “blame game” creates a hostile work environment in which individuals are looking not for answers but only to avoid being associated with failure. Thus, complexity may diminish non-reporting since it is not possible to blame a single person or department for a complex problem. As such, by recognizing and becoming conscious that complex problems are just that (complex), incorporating a spirituality of imperfection into organizational processes can overcome the problems of non-reporting and blaming. Moreover, a spirituality of imperfection may help to create a culture where everyone involved in a process understands that learning only occurs when employees feel empowered to report problems truthfully and trust that responsible managers will conduct proper analyses to determine the true causes of failure. Further, an organization that embraces a spirituality of imperfection is more likely to set realistic expectations and create accountability standards that are accepted and perceived as fair (Groysberg, Lee, Price, & Cheng, 2018).

Also, a spirituality of imperfection can encourage intelligent failure by creating a work culture in which seeking help and advice is the norm. We propose that organizations that introduce a spirituality of imperfection will be better at learning than other organizations since information sharing plays an important role in learning from failure (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001). Such exchanges allow organizational members to learn both from their own failures and the failures of others (Dahlin et al., 2018). In particular, asking for information, advice, and help before acting allows one to gain insights from others’ failures, while asking for the same in post-mortem events promotes learning from one’s own failures (Ellis & Davidi, 2005). Applying the insights gained from such information exchange may help to transform bad failure into intelligent failure.

Furthermore, a spirituality of imperfection may increase advice and information seeking. Most clearly, embracing the reality of our own imperfection points out the value of seeking assistance from others: if we do not expect ourselves to have all the answers, others' input appears more valuable. Embracing imperfection can also reduce the perceived social costs of seeking advice. When organizational members do not require themselves to present a façade of perfection, the personal shame of appearing incompetent due to asking for advice is likely reduced. When the organizational culture includes an acceptance of imperfection, both in oneself and one's co-workers, the social threat of information and advice seeking is further diminished, because organizational members can reasonably expect that the social costs imposed by others will be smaller. A spirituality of failure, then, may both increase the perceived value and reduce the perceived costs of seeking advice from others, leading to increased sharing of information and advice within the organization.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we argued that different levels of failure could be experienced in the workplace. Some are a matter of training, attention, and focus. Others are more personal and require us to reassess our emotions, traits, and abilities to see if our behavior matches our values. We suggested that intelligent failure is characterized by the ability to learn from failures, and we posited that a spirituality of imperfection engenders the belief that failure is part of what makes us human. A spirituality of imperfection suggests that, as humans, we all make mistakes, and these mistakes are a chance for us to learn and grow. Having empathy for others starts with having empathy for ourselves. Thus, the ability to learn from our failures may be contingent on the degree to which we have developed a spirituality of imperfection. Indeed, Kurtz and Ketcham (1992) argued that, at the individual level, individuals who cultivate a spirituality of imperfection are less prone to conceit and self-sufficiency since the approach demands self-awareness and allows help seeking.

Although intelligent failure is beneficial to organizations, organizational members are often hesitant to seek information and advice because of the perceived social costs of doing so.

Table 6.1 Examining Organizational Practices

-
1. To what extent do organizational members tend to engage in *satisficing* (i.e., making adequate rather than optimal decisions)?
 2. On a scale of 1 to 10, what are the organization's risk taking tendencies? What should they be?
 3. In examining key events and incidents in the past five years, to what degree were organizational members rewarded or punished for taking risks? For making mistakes?
 4. To what extent does it seem that failures are repeated? Covered up? Characterized by a search for scapegoats?
 5. To what extent do managers have the tendency to overlook incompetent, sloppy, inaccurate, or imprecise work?
 6. How much training and support are offered to enable organizational members to follow organizational processes and procedures?
 7. How much support is offered to organizational members who make mistakes?
 8. To what extent is individual growth valued? Are organizational members allowed to be a *work in progress* or is perfection expected?
 9. What mechanisms exist that encourage organizational members to ask for help and guidance?
 10. What processes does the organization have in place to learn from its failures? Formal after-the-fact review processes?
-

A spirituality of imperfection, at both individual and organizational levels, lowers those costs and, consequently, spurs advice and information seeking. Unsurprisingly, the likely outcomes of a spirituality of imperfection, that is psychological safety, non-blaming, and tolerance for errors, both lower the costs of advice seeking and increase learning from failure (Edmondson, 1996; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Keith & Frese, 2005; Khatri, Brown, & Hicks, 2009; Tjosvold, Yu, & Hui 2004).

In summary, organizational leaders need to reflect on the extent to which their organization's culture supports and encourages intelligent failures. The questions posed in Table 6.1 may be a good starting point for this reflection. If indeed, as Cameron (2008) suggests, organizational culture can be changed with deliberate managerial action, then their answers to these questions may reveal where to focus their attention and efforts.

Note

1. It is important to note that the focus of this chapter is extending the conversation around spirituality and intelligent failure at the organizational level. At the individual level, there is already a considerable and growing literature on engaging in spiritual growth, dealing with failures, developing humility, and their impact on individual outcomes.

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