

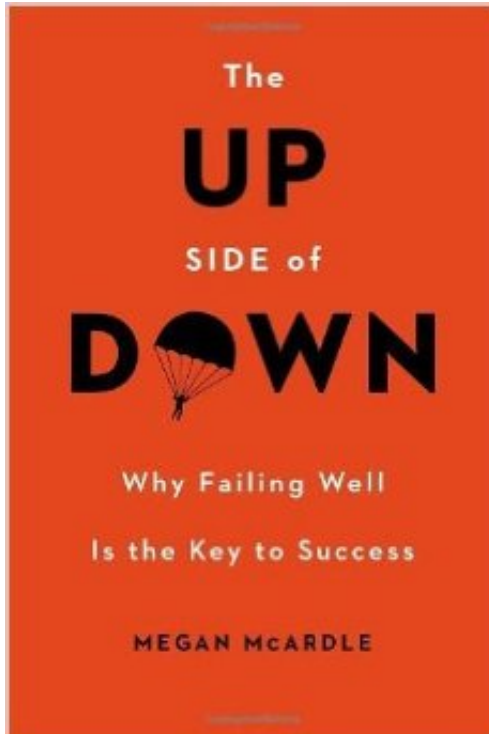


A Culture That Supports Smart Failures

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I recently heard about an interesting new book—[The Up Side of Down: Why Failing Well Is the Key to Success](#) by Megan McArdle. [A part of McArdle's book](#) analyzes research into why some people thrive on challenging tasks even though they don't do them well. Other people hate those situations. Why?

According to Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, it has to do with whether you have a “fixed mind-set” or a “growth mind-set.” The “people who dislike challenges think that talent is a fixed thing that you're either born with or not. The people who relish them think [talent is] something you can nourish by doing stuff you're not good at.” The latter group sees a challenge as “an opportunity to deepen their talents,” but the former group sees it as “a dipstick that measures how high your ability level is.”

I want people to tackle challenges at the School even though sometimes they will do them poorly, and sometime even fail. We should embrace difficult situations because they are an opportunity to



learn and grow. How can we support people who have a growth mind-set? How can we encourage those with a fixed mind-set to push beyond their comfort zone and embrace challenges that might advance the School's work?

Part of the answer has to involve creating a culture at the School that supports and rewards people who take risks and have "smart failures." In other words, encourage people who do their best and take calculated chances—even if for some reason things don't work out as planned. Maybe someone designs a course in a new way that crashes and burns when it is delivered, or a person delivers information electronically in a way that public officials are not yet prepared to embrace. Folks should learn from their efforts and move forward—without worrying that their colleagues might criticize them for not having done it perfectly.



A few years ago I created Friends of the Institute committees across regions of the state to support our fundraising efforts. It required lots of time and energy to manage the groups and, unfortunately, they didn't raise much money. The people enjoyed getting together, but most of them were uncomfortable with fundraising. It was a worthwhile experiment that taught me a lot about what would not work in our fundraising. The experience also pointed us toward a more strategic and targeted approach for involving selected public officials in raising money. Plus I learned that I would never again sponsor a golf tournament. Ever.

We can improve in terms of creating a culture at the School that embraces risk and accepts occasional failures. We live in a world that increasingly expects perfection and has little patience when someone falls short. That is especially true in higher education. At the School we expect people to figure out every possible contingency before they try something new. The way we evaluate proposed projects may inadvertently send a strong signal that you always need to get things right on the first try.

Faculty and staff still show a remarkable willingness to experiment with new approaches around what we do and how we do it. It should not require unusual courage to take smart risks in our work. Lives are not at stake. I want to continue strengthening the culture of innovation and creativity at the School. Please share any ideas you might have about how to make it happen. In



the meantime, I plan to look for ideas by reading *The Up Side of Down: Why Failing Well Is the Key to Success* .

