

## **Failure, Risk, and the Entrepreneurial Library**

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This past spring, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg addressed the graduates from Harvard College and said that “the greatest successes come from having the freedom to fail.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in a recent letter to shareholders, Amazon’s founder Jeff Bezos made it a point to equate invention with failure, calling them “inseparable twins.”<sup>2</sup> Arguably leading two of the most innovative companies in the world, both CEOs have essentially the same message: without a culture that accepts the inevitability of failure, and learns from it, innovation will remain elusive and/or nonexistent. Clearly with risk comes a degree of failure, but by playing it safe you get exactly what you would expect: mediocrity.

That the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) has established an Innovation Lab acknowledges that many research libraries lack the wherewithal required to innovate, despite leadership that yearns to embrace change. Several reasons contribute to the entrenchment of library practice, most notably legacy staff overly comfortable with playing it safe and desiring order. Unfortunately for those who are risk-averse, entrepreneurial culture by its nature changes rapidly, tolerates risk and failure, and tends to have periods of disruption. It’s not the image most have of libraries, but ironically libraries have been passive change agents for a long time. Even when we consider some of the best companies in the world, many of their services and innovations mirror long-time library practices: Facebook with personalization, Amazon with delivery, Google with search and discovery, Netflix with streaming content, and Apple with mobility. None of this is new to libraries, we just did not go out and form multinational, multibillion-dollar companies to provide these services. The irony, however, lies in the fact that we are now playing catch-up with the same companies that learned from our success.

## **Give up the white papers and three-year plans**

Instead, facilitate open-ended brainstorming discussions, where the absurd to the sublime are encouraged. Be intentional about bringing people from differing backgrounds and expertise into these discussions. Establish an expectation that they are to participate. Diversity of ideas challenges the canon. Innovation cannot happen within the canon.

At no point should budget considerations or other resource restrictions be allowed into the conversation. Nothing kills the innovative spirit like the budget officer saying, “How are we going to pay for that?” This approach has its detractors however. Some feel that without parameters innovation ideas can lose context. For me, however, it’s not that resource parameters are unimportant, but that the sequencing can occur much later in the process, after the compelling idea emerges.

Similarly, the positional white paper scenario leads to wordsmithing and delays and stifles movement forward. Worse yet is the three-year planning document. Innovation happens quickly and unexpectedly. Change becomes the norm and adaptability defines the process, and over time becomes normative for the culture. Three-year plans, like white papers, lead to over-editing and unnecessary critique of the writing, and the ideas themselves become subordinate. Innovation does not follow a script.

If documentation is required, try a one-pager outlining the idea and possible benefits. Make it something like an elevator talk: intelligible, concise, and compelling. As to the three-year plan and the white paper, they may work in some organizations, but by their nature they scream “safe, predictable, and ordinary.” However, as adaptations are needed from well-laid plans, the door opens for innovation, so there can be a silver lining as long as the plan undergoes continuous assessment.

## **Planning for perfection is the enemy of progress**

Instead try a project to test the plan. The project will involve risk. It will take people away from “essential” operational duties; it may (and should) challenge existing practices; make it fun and exciting. Some other guidelines for projects include instilling a sense of urgency without panic. They should be timely and show results pretty quickly. Moreover, the evaluative process should be concerned with value and scale: does the idea provide enough value to warrant becoming a program?

Some projects may require several attempts, along with some failures while leadership begins to position the organization for the project-to-program evolution. Libraries and universities tend to change slower than say, Amazon, for a variety of good reasons. Change should always be at the forefront of good leadership and strategic thinking, but recalling the adage “good is the enemy of great,” the next step creates a pervasive culture of collaboration, and creativity that embraces change, with a strong tolerance for risk.

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## **Recruit the best**

Any organization can only be as great as its people. Recruiting for entrepreneurial librarians requires screening that assesses potential and fit. For the most part these qualities can be summed up generally in the four Cs: collaboration, creativity, content, and change. Hire people who see that what’s good for the library/institution is good for them, not the other way around. Résumé builders tend to miss that. But people who focus on the greater good tend to be born collaborators and creativity comes naturally. Change remains pervasive, so it is important to have a comfort level with that, and of course libraries are still about content.

## Final thought

If ARL libraries want to awaken from their dogmatic slumbers they need to embrace risk, and the failures that come along with risk. The interesting thing about failure is that innovative processes usually spring up after setbacks. But, if we keep doing it the way we always did, the real risk is obsolescence. Courage requires that we step out of our comfort and safe zones. Resist the path of least resistance, resist the ordinary. As Bob Dylan noted, “there’s no success like failure, and... failure’s no success at all.”<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

1. “Mark Zuckerberg’s Commencement Address at Harvard,” *Harvard Gazette*, May 25, 2017, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/05/mark-zuckerbergs-speech-as-written-for-harvards-class-of-2017/>.
2. Jeffrey P. Bezos, letter to Amazon shareholders, [April 5, 2016], <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1018724/000119312516530910/d168744dex991.htm>.
3. Bob Dylan, “Love Minus Zero/No Limit,” lyrics, 1965, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/love-minus-zero-no-limit/>.

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**To cite this article:** Tom Wall. “Failure, Risk, and the Entrepreneurial Library.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 292 (2017): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.292.2>.