

## **Using Failure as a Learning Tool: A Research-in-Progress Report on Workflow Redesign and Professional Growth**

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### **Abstract**

In professional contexts, failure is often viewed negatively, yet it can be a powerful source of learning and development when examined intentionally. This research-in-progress investigates how failures encountered during a workflow redesign project contributed to professional growth, enhanced team performance, and improved leadership practices. Using a reflective action research approach, data were collected over one month through daily reflective journals, informal interviews, and observational notes. Initial deployment of a digital task-management tool exposed misalignment, inconsistent engagement, and workflow inefficiencies, underscoring the limitations of purely technical interventions.

Iterative testing, structured reflection, and human-centered adjustments transformed these challenges into meaningful learning opportunities. Findings suggest that small-scale experimentation, reflective practice, active team engagement, and psychological safety are critical for converting failure into actionable insights. The study advances organizational learning theory by integrating Kolb's experiential learning cycle, Argyris & Schön's double-loop learning, and Edmondson's psychological safety frameworks. Practically, it highlights strategies for cultivating resilience, adaptive capacity, and human-centered leadership in complex professional environments.

**Keywords:** Failure as learning; Action research; Double-loop learning; Experiential learning; Psychological safety; Workflow redesign; Leadership development; Organizational learning.

## **Introduction**

In contemporary professional settings, errors are often stigmatized, and successes celebrated, which can discourage risk-taking. Yet failure provides valuable insight into team processes, leadership assumptions, and operational inefficiencies. This study examines a workflow redesign initiative in a geographically dispersed team to explore how deliberately reflecting on failure can enhance professional development, improve coordination, and strengthen leadership capabilities.

**Research Aim:** To investigate how failures encountered in workflow redesign can be leveraged as learning tools to enhance professional growth, team performance, and leadership capabilities.

**Research Question:** How can structured reflection and iterative adaptation of failures in workflow redesign initiatives improve professional skills, team effectiveness, and leadership practices?

## **Literature Review**

Organizational learning literature emphasizes learning from mistakes as a critical component of development. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle illustrates how iterative action, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation promote growth.

Argyris & Schön's (1978) double-loop learning highlights the importance of challenging underlying assumptions rather than merely correcting surface errors.

Psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) enables open discussion of challenges, facilitating learning and innovation.

Change management theories (Kotter, 2012; Heath & Heath, 2010) advocate incremental implementation, stakeholder involvement, and small wins to achieve lasting improvements. While these frameworks recognize the value of learning from failure, empirical studies examining workflow redesign in real-world contexts remain limited. This study contributes practical insights by integrating reflective action research with experiential and double-loop learning principles.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a reflective action research approach, enabling iterative learning throughout the workflow redesign process. The researcher engaged actively with the team, observing processes, reflecting on emerging patterns, and making incremental adjustments.

### **Data Sources and Duration**

Data were collected over one month from multiple sources:

- Daily reflective journals maintained by the researcher
- Informal interviews and feedback sessions with team members
- Observational notes documenting engagement, delays, and interactions

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data were analyzed using a systematic reflective process. Reflective journals, interview transcripts, and observational notes were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns related to workflow issues, team engagement, communication, resistance, and leadership assumptions. Patterns were grouped into thematic categories and refined through iterative comparison across sources.

This inductive approach allowed insights to emerge while being interpreted in relation to Kolb's experiential learning cycle, Argyris & Schön's double-loop learning, and Edmondson's psychological safety framework.

Note: Thematic analysis was performed manually, consistent with the flexible and context-sensitive nature of action research.

### **Credibility and Rigor**

Credibility was enhanced by triangulating data across reflective logs, interviews, and observations. Reflexive journaling supported transparency and awareness of researcher bias. While inter-coder reliability was not used due to the single-researcher design, repeated reviews and cross-comparison ensured analytical rigor.

### **Ethical Considerations**

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants
- Data were anonymized to protect participant identities
- Participation was voluntary, with no adverse consequences for non-participation

### **Limitations**

- Single-case design limits generalizability
- Potential reflective bias due to self-reporting
- Findings are context-specific to the studied team and organization

### **Findings**

#### **Initial Challenges**

The first implementation of the task-management platform revealed several issues:

- Inconsistent communication: Coordination across time zones was limited despite the platform
- Uneven engagement: Resistance from some members caused gaps in workflow
- Misalignment with work habits: Individual approaches conflicted with the new system, causing frustration

These challenges highlighted overreliance on technical solutions and insufficient attention to human dynamics and stakeholder engagement.

## **Iterative Experimentation and Reflection**

An iterative approach facilitated learning from failure:

- Pilot testing: Adjustments were trialed with a sub-team to reduce risk and observe outcomes
- Reflective journaling: Daily logs captured interactions, resistance, delays, and emerging patterns
- Process adjustments: Structured check-ins, simplified task structures, and transparent communication were introduced

These interventions transformed initial setbacks into actionable insights, improving team function and leadership practices.

## **Evidence from Logs and Interviews**

Anonymized excerpts illustrate patterns:

- Week 1 log: “Despite introducing the platform, responses remain delayed. Some team members appear hesitant to engage publicly.”
- Feedback session: “It felt overwhelming at first, but once we discussed why the change was needed, it became easier to adapt.”
- Later reflection: “The issue was not the tool itself but my assumption that digital adoption automatically ensures alignment.”

## **Analytical Insights**

Key themes:

- Failure as diagnostic feedback: Revealed blind spots in leadership assumptions and process design
- Human-centered change matters: Trust, engagement, and communication are as critical as technical solutions
- Small experiments enable learning: Piloting provided a safe environment for experimentation
- Reflection drives growth: Daily structured reflection turned experience into actionable insights
- Mindset shapes outcomes: Viewing failure as a learning opportunity enhanced resilience and adaptability
- Professional growth: Strengthened the author’s ability to manage ambiguity, actively listen, build trust, and apply inclusive leadership practices

### **Single-Loop vs Double-Loop Learning**

- Single-loop learning: Focused on correcting surface-level errors (e.g., adjusting meeting schedules or task assignments)
- Double-loop learning: Emerged when underlying assumptions were challenged, such as the belief that technology alone ensures alignment. This led to adjustments in leadership style, communication practices, and engagement strategies

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings align with experiential and double-loop learning frameworks, demonstrating how structured reflection and iterative adaptation convert failures into professional growth. Psychological safety enabled open discussion, fostering learning and process improvements.

- Cultivate an experimentation mindset
- Pilot initiatives before large-scale implementation
- Maintain reflective logs for continuous learning
- Balance technical and human-centered solutions
- Promote psychologically safe environments for discussion

### **Transferability and Contextual Conditions**

Despite the single-case design, insights may apply to:

- Teams undergoing digital transformation
- Geographically dispersed teams
- Leaders implementing workflow redesign initiatives

Transferability requires psychological safety, leadership openness, and organizational tolerance for experimentation. Highly hierarchical or risk-averse cultures may need additional support.

### **Conceptual Model**

Dynamic Reflective Adaptation Cycle:

1. Workflow Failure: Initial misalignment and inefficiencies
2. Reflective Analysis: Daily reflections and feedback identify patterns

3. Iterative Adaptation: Small-scale piloting, process adjustments, and communication improvements
4. Team Engagement & Psychological Safety: Build trust, transparency, and participation
5. Enhanced Performance & Leadership Growth: Improved coordination, team outcomes, and leadership capability

Feedback Loops: Engagement and psychological safety reinforce iterative adaptation, creating a continuous learning cycle rather than a linear sequence

### **Conclusion**

Failure, when approached systematically, is a powerful catalyst for team and professional development. The workflow redesign case shows that initial setbacks, rather than indicating incompetence, reveal critical insights into leadership assumptions, team dynamics, and operational inefficiencies. Structured reflection, iterative adaptation, and human-centered strategies transformed these challenges into actionable learning.

#### Key Lessons:

- Failure serves as a diagnostic tool
- Small-scale experimentation reduces risk while providing rich learning opportunities
- Psychological safety and team engagement are essential for learning
- Reflective practice combined with iterative adaptation fosters resilience and growth-oriented leadership.

These findings integrate Kolb's experiential learning, Argyris & Schön's double-loop learning, and Edmondson's psychological safety frameworks, offering practical strategies for professionals navigating complex projects. Future research across multiple teams and organizations could enhance generalizability and explore the influence of organizational culture on learning from failure.

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