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# A BRILLIANT FAILURE... AND YET A SUCCESS

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## VALUE YOUR MISTAKES AS WELL AS YOUR SUCCESSSES

THE INSTITUTE OF BRILLIANT FAILURES  
AIMS TO PROMOTE A POSITIVE ATTITUDE  
TOWARDS FAILURES.

**TAKE A RISK, MAKE A MISTAKE, AND LEARN  
FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES: THIS ATTITUDE  
IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT  
IN OUR SOCIETY.**

**By Paul Iske and Bas Ruysenaars**

**M**any of us behave in a risk adverse fashion because we feel that the negative consequences of failure are more important than the potential rewards of success. The fears of losing our job, of risking bankruptcy, and of stepping into the unknown are greater than the recognition, status and fulfilment which would come should our initiative be successful. Our reluctance to 'stick our neck out' is reinforced by the negative way in which failures are viewed by the world around us.

And when things are going ok, why would we take that risk? However, the importance of experimenting and taking risks – which is perhaps even greater in these turbulent economic times - should not be underestimated. Otherwise mediocrity will dominate!

**Suppose you set yourself the goal of finding a faster trade route to the Far East.** You organise sponsorship for your voyage, and make sure you have the best ships and crew available at that time, and set sail in a Westerly direction from the Portuguese coast. However, instead of reaching the Far East you discover an unknown continent.

**Just like Columbus, if you move beyond the limits of what is known then you often make unexpected discoveries.** Progress and renewal are inextricably linked with experimentation and risktaking – and with the possibility of failure. Dom Pérignon had to work his way through thousands of 'exploding bottles' before he could successfully bottle champagne. And Viagra would not have been discovered if Pfizer had not shown determination in their long search for a medicine to treat a very different condition, angina.



The world in which we live is characterised by an ever increasing pace of change and complexity: in many areas of life we are in the middle of massive shifts, such as the emergence of new economic and political powers, and climate change. At the same time, primarily as a result of the Internet, our globally connected world is getting smaller. The old 'barriers' of distance, time and money are disappearing, with the result that everyone can participate in the exchange of ideas and in competition. Globally, competition in the areas of knowledge, ideas and services, which are of increasing importance in our economies, is intensifying. In this environment mediocrity will not be sufficient. Michael Eisner, former CEO van The Walt Disney Company was convinced that the punishment of failure will always lead to mediocrity, arguing that: "mediocrity is what fearful people always settle for". In short, the importance of a more positive attitude towards risk-taking, experimentation, and daring to fail, is growing.

Such an attitude becomes even more relevant when we realize and accept that the massive shifts mentioned above are accompanied by increasing uncertainties. According to strategy management guru Igor Ansoff these uncertainties limit the possibilities for both individuals and organisations to plan ahead. As uncertainty grows, so does the need for what he calls 'proactive flexibility': the capability to think and act before others do, and the ability to deal with the unexpected developments and changes in our environment. To find our way in these turbulent times we need to learn to 'navigate' rather than to control and to manage – and these skills are developed by experimentation, by making mistakes, and by learning from them. The shifts and developments outlined above are accompanied by an increasing number of people who are trading the security of an employment contract with an organisation for a career as entrepreneur, opting for more flexibility, freedom and risks. In 2007 the Dutch Chamber of Commerce registered a record number of 100.000 new 'starters'.

And the Dutch Trade Unions forecast that the numbers of those who are selfemployed will grow from 550.000 in 2006 to 1 million in 2010. Although an increasing number of individuals are taking this step, they are often confronted by incomprehension amongst those around them if their move is not immediately rewarded.

The goal of the Institute of Brilliant Failures is to promote a positive attitude towards failure. In this context the term 'brilliant' refers to a serious effort to achieve something, but which led to a different outcome and the opportunity to learn – inspirational efforts which deserve more than disdain and the stigma of failure. The Institute of Brilliant Failures is a brainchild of Dialogues, an initiative of ABN-AMRO. Dialogues' mission is to stimulate entrepreneurial thinking and behavior not only in the business community but in society at large, in all who can contribute towards changing our attitudes towards 'mistakes'. Policy makers, legislators, and top management can contribute by streamlining regulations and by ensuring that the negative implications of failure are substituted by a positive incentive to 'stick one's neck out'. The media can play a role in reporting the positive spin-offs and effects of 'failure'. And each of us can contribute by creating more 'space' for risk-taking and entrepreneurship in our immediate environment, and being more receptive towards 'mistakes'.

The Dutch intolerance towards 'brilliant' failure is illustrated on the Institute's website by those who have experienced it first-hand. After Michiel Frackers' Internet company Bitmagic failed in the Netherlands, US-based companies offered him a number of attractive positions. Frackers: "For example, the position of Managing Director Europe at Google. But I did not get any offers from Dutch companies. In the States the reaction was...Good! Now you've a little blood on the nose... Everyone says that you learn more from your failures than from your successes. However, it seems that in the Netherlands, we don't really mean it".

Many 'brilliant failures' are born along the lines of Columbus' discovery of America. The 'inventor' is working on one problem and by luck – or better-said serendipity – finds a solution for another problem. For the one who was working on the initial problem, and who is confronted with unexpected results, it is often – but not always - 'difficult' to see a direct application for the results of their work – i.e. to see the value in their 'failure'. But a brilliant failure does not always have to lead to an unexpected success. The learnings may be hidden in the failure itself.

In 2007 'socially responsible' Dutch entrepreneur Marcel Zwart started developing an electric-powered delivery van for use in inner cities. The introduction of this type of vehicle would significantly improve the air quality in urban centres with a high traffic density. In addition, he planned to use young local unemployed people with technical qualifications in the production process. He secured the necessary initial capital, the technology was 'market-ready', and market research in the Netherlands and abroad indicated that there was significant sales potential. However, despite all of this, he is struggling to move the project forwards: investors still see too many risks, the government do not consider the technology 'proven' and in order to qualify for subsidies he needs to finance the project with 50-70% from other sources. These factors, together with the complex regulations, have created a vicious circle and the project has come more or less to a standstill. Zwart: "I have learnt how important it is never to underestimate how difficult it is for people to look at a project from a broader perspective, to look beyond their own immediate interests. This type of project needs an integrated approach from day one – and that is an essential point for independent entrepreneurs. That said, the introduction of this type of vehicle is nearer by, and if we can revive the initiative, we have already taken a significant number of steps in the right direction..."

(translated article NRCNext 07/10/08)



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*(translated article NRCNext 07/10/08)*

**“IT’S BETTER TO AIM TOO HIGH AND FAIL THAN TO AIM TOO LOW AND SUCCEED”**  
KEN ROBINSON

## WHAT IS A BRILLIANT FAILURE?

**YOUR GOAL IS FOUNDED IN SOUND INTENTIONS**  
(I.E. NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS OR SOCIETY  
AT LARGE)  
**YES!**

**YOU DO ALL YOU CAN TO AVOID UNNECESSARY  
ERRORS**  
(NO POOR PERPARATION)  
**YES!**

**YOU DO NOT ACHIEVE YOUR ORIGINAL GOAL**  
**YES!**

**YOU LEARN SOMETHING FROM YOUR FAILURE**  
**YES**

**CONGRATULATIONS! WE CAN OFFICIALLY  
CLASSIFY YOUR CASE AS A BRILLIANT FAILURE!**

**LEARN FROM OTHERS AND SHARE YOUR  
BRILLIANT FAILURE AT  
[WWW.BRILLIANTFAILURES.COM](http://WWW.BRILLIANTFAILURES.COM)**

## QUICK SCAN

**WHAT IS THE 'BRILLIANT FAILURE' CLIMATE  
LIKE IN YOUR ORGANISATION? IS THERE  
ENOUGH SPACE TO EXPERIMENT BE  
PROACTIVE TAKE A RISK MAKE A MISTAKE  
AND LEARN FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES?**

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE  
ABOUT A BRILLIANT FAILURE QUICK SCAN,  
QUICK FIX AND OTHER POSSIBILITIES OF  
THE INSTITUTE OF BRILLIANT FAILURES.**

[WWW.BRILLIANTFAILURES.COM](http://WWW.BRILLIANTFAILURES.COM)

The screenshot shows the website's header with a search bar, navigation menu (The Institute, Brilliant Failures, News, Contact), and a central shield logo with a brain and the text 'FAILURE IS AN OPTION'. Below the header is the main title 'INSTITUTE OF BRILLIANT FAILURES'. The content area features a 'MOST RECENT' section with a featured article titled 'Visualize Failure' (Failure Added: 26-03-2011, category: Personal, viewed: 282 times) and a 'Vote for this Brilliant Failure' button. To the right is an 'UPLOAD YOUR BRILLIANT FAILURE' button and a 'Categories' list (History, Art, Society, Personal). Further right is a 'The latest news' section with a list of articles, including 'founder Institute of Brilliant Failures at TEDx Maastricht - The future of health' and 'Brilliant Failure Culture Checklist'.

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