

If at first you don't succeed... embrace and share the failures

Rob Sutton MCIfA (4536),
Cotswold Archaeology
and Kate Geary MCIfA (1301), CIfA

A very successful American football coach by the name of Joe Gibbs said that

'failures are expected by losers and ignored by winners'.

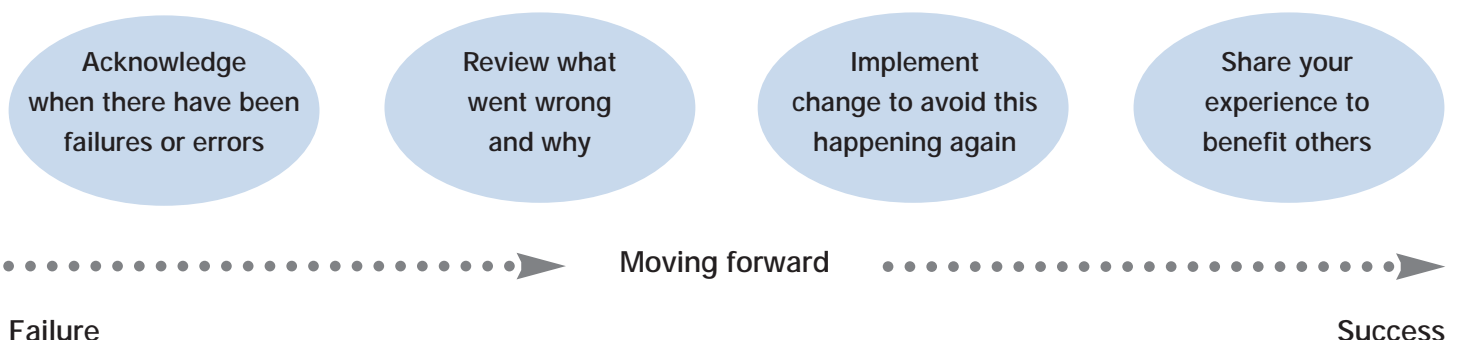


Unlike Joe, most of us acknowledge the need to learn from our mistakes in order to avoid repeating them. However, acknowledging them publicly, for the benefit of the profession, is rare. We are (slowly) becoming more adept at sharing good news stories and best practice, but in a competitive and immature industry, sharing failures is simply not part of our psyche. Yet the ability to reflect on one's actions is a critical component of professional ethics and is essential if we are to develop and move forward as a profession. So critical, in fact, that the ability to reflect on successes and failures and learn lessons from them is firmly embedded in the *Assessment of professional competence and commitment* criteria for Chartered Archaeologist published last month.

In a refreshing departure from the norm, the 2017 Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) conference in Cardiff devoted an entire session to 'failure not being fatal'. The session abstract adopted Winston Churchill's quote that *'success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts'*. The session papers did not disappoint as they explored a diverse range of themes; the presence of failed cultures in the archaeological record; the adoption of a conservation philosophy that lets us embrace the loss of physical fabric; and how the fear of failure impedes innovation.

So now it's our turn to use a quote completely detached from its context: *'if you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign that you're not doing anything very innovative'*. How's that for a brave, no-fear approach? It's 2018 and we're quoting Woody Allen. At the forthcoming 2019 CIfA conference in Leeds – themed 'values, benefits and legacies' – there will be a session to delve further into the subject of 'professional' failures.

Quotes like this are often abridged to fit onto posters of airbrushed waterfalls or kittens gazing at butterflies; so, perhaps, some of the original context might have been lost. And maybe I need to take the time to read one of Mr Gibbs' much-vaunted motivational books, to better understand the subtleties of his message. But, on face value, this sounds like absolute rubbish.





ClfA conferences provide an excellent forum for open discussions with other professionals about topical issues. Credit: Adam Stanford/Aerial Cam

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Winston Churchill

With the session at TAG 2017 potentially still fresh in the minds of those who attended, you might suggest that another session on the same subject lacks innovation, but a conversation was started at Cardiff. We want to keep this going, potentially engaging a different audience as we go. As the ClfA 2019 session will undoubtedly prompt a new and courageous way of working, embracing our failures alongside our successes, we also want to consider the mechanisms for sharing this kind of information, to help lessons learned benefit the sector. Maybe this conversation can become a standing item for all future ClfA conferences?

How will it work? The ClfA 2019 conference session will be more than a confessional. At its heart it will be the lessons that can be and

must be learnt when things go wrong, if improvements are to be made. It won't dwell on the micro-decisions that led to failures, but on the big potatoes; the cultures and behaviours that inhibit growth (for the individual and profession) and the project designs that, in hindsight, were poorly conceived. We are hoping for an honest and open discussion which might include issues such as

- when archaeological prospecting techniques just didn't work
- when attempts to innovate don't
- when big data and research-driven synthesis reveal nothing new
- when contracts designed to deliver value didn't

- when outreach projects reached out to no-one
- when partnerships and collaborative working just reveal insurmountable differences in corporate behaviours
- when training programmes take so long to design and deliver that the need no longer exists

The diversity of subject matter should allow the conversation to be relevant to those who work in the private, public and charitable sectors. At a time when the successes of projects are tightly measured and audited, we do not underplay the confidence and courage required to come forward and share your failures.

Contact(s):

robert.sutton@cotswoldarchaeology.co.uk
kate.geary@archaeologists.net