


Accelerate - The F-Word edition

# Genius from elsewhere



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Does the Kiwi attitude to failure differ from other markets? Peter Thomson, the strategy director of design and innovation firm Richards Partners, thinks so. He shares some lessons from the big smoke.

It has become so common to say that we need to embrace failure in New Zealand that the plea has lost almost all meaning. My time working in venture capital in London and New York has given me an up-close look into what it really means to embrace failure when money and jobs are on the line. And I've learned a thing or two from American and British entrepreneurs about how to embrace failure and rebound from it.

### Fail fast

In product development and marketing there is a tendency for New Zealand companies to want to gestate an idea for far too long. Instead, we need to learn to get prototypes and campaigns out the door faster, so that the resulting feedback can be used to improve the product. The quicker an idea can get real world feedback, the less time is wasted on things that no one really wants.

As Mike Tyson famously said, "Everyone has a plan, until they get punched in the mouth". In New York I noticed that companies were willing to launch with only a "minimum viable product", meaning that their game-plan wasn't complete, but that they are willing to launch a product and accept feedback from the marketplace so they could improve things as they go.

Instead of asking for feedback on rough wireframes and mockups, the trend in London is now to work so quickly that a stripped back but functional version of a mobile app or website can be deployed in a matter of hours. This allows for user feedback on the real product, not just on the sketches. The feedback from users interacting with something real is so much more vivid than just a focus group or piece of market research. Moving faster takes the sting out of each individual failure.

### Failure is relative

Something that I observed in the startup community in New York is that they simply don't use the word failure. It seems like a trick of language, but what in New Zealand would be called a failed project is simply referred to as "validated learning" and used as input for the next project. A failure is only really a failure if you use it as an excuse to give up. In the startup world, people are working on enough ideas concurrently that any one failure is just the slowest runner dropping behind the pack.



Peter Thomson

In New Zealand companies, I've noticed a bias towards going for a one-hit swing for the fences idea instead of trying lots of small ideas. Failure can be terrifying inside large companies and government departments with career ending consequences. I've found that when trying to help large organisations innovate faster that the trick is to make failure relative across multiple projects, so that it's as simple as winning or losing a running race.

Instead of measuring the success and failure of each project in isolation, startups treat every metric and measurement as relative to the other projects running at the same time. This experimental mindset means that one or two ideas are always winning and one or two are always "failing", but no one bemoans the failures because there are more than enough other options on the table. Not everyone gets a medal, and that's okay.

### Fail visibly

Startups in both America and the UK are much more willing to share their internal trials and tribulations with their peers. New Zealanders would consider it impolite to wear our hearts on our sleeves. We want to hide our failures. But in today's more open business environment nothing is taboo and I've seen blog posts about disagreements between founders, failed product launches and tough customer feedback.

The benefit of "working out loud" is that customers, suppliers and potential employees can see the depth of integrity in the team behind the company. I've found that the more open a business is, the more it attracts like-minded people. Content marketing and company blogging is hollow without the willingness to talk honestly about what is going on behind the scenes.

If I could make a plea to every New Zealand business person it would be to blog more and in particular to blog more about their failures. Rather than embarrassing themselves, I think that they'd find that the response was surprisingly positive.

[Failure is forensic](#) | [No, No, No, No, No, No, Yes](#)

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