

# Stop saying “fail”

by Jason Cohen on September 10, 2023

Language shapes our perception of setbacks. Use words other than “failure” to describe situations and to suggest the next step.



“Instead of calling it a failure, we just rebrand it as a dark and gritty reboot of previous profits.”

It’s not fail fast. It’s not fail forward. It’s not “fail” at all.

“Fail” is almost never the right word for what is happening. It’s so final, so negative, and it’s a dead end: What do you do after a failure? Mope?

Words have meaning. They can explain what’s really going on, and suggest what should be done next. The word “fail” accomplishes neither.

## Exploring new territory

If you’re solving a maze, and a path doesn’t work out, you haven’t “failed,” you’ve only backtracked. This is a necessary and natural aspect of exploration and creating businesses and products; in fact it’s even called the idea maze. It often comes in the form of an experiment. The result of an experiment is evidence supporting or rejecting the hypothesis. Neither result is a “failure.” A/B testing is a good practice, even though most of the time you will not have stumbled upon an improvement.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *experiment, test, bet, learning, investigate, trial, retry, probe.*

“There are two possible outcomes: if the result confirms the hypothesis, then you’ve made a measurement. If the result is contrary to the hypothesis, then you’ve made a discovery”

—Enrico Fermi

## Revolutionizing

If you’re creating something new, never accomplished by anyone before, and it doesn’t immediately revolutionize the industry, you haven’t “failed,” you’ve just not yet found the breakthrough. Often innovations require many trials before the right solution is uncovered. If the right answer were obvious, it wouldn’t be an innovation.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *backtrack, iterate, trial, attempt, step, miss.*

“I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

—Thomas A. Edison

## Learning

If you’re learning a new skill, and you stumble, get confused, get lost, or think you’ve mastered it only to find there’s still a long road ahead, you haven’t “failed,” you’re growing. No good teacher would get mad at a stu-

dent for not learning a skill instantly, or even sliding backward. The learning curve is well-understood, and it is not a straight line.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *practice, cultivate, acquire, develop, learning curve, learning moment, trial, progression, evolve.*

“*I am always doing that which I can not do, in order that I may learn how to do it.*”

—Vincent van Gogh

### Iterating

Are you iterating on something that is fundamentally working, just making it better? This is optimization. Not all attempts at improvement will work, or have as much effect as hoped, but surely we shouldn’t call ourselves “failures” when things are basically fine as they are.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *refine, calibrate, optimize, polish, hone, correct, fine-tune, dial-in.*

“*The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.*”

—Henry Ford

### Solving problems

Are you solving a problem, but a minor one, particular to your current circumstance, where your high-level strategy and plan is still correct? Problem-solving in a complex space—whether a one-person startup or a thousand-person organization—cannot possibly proceed with innovation and speed and yet also no setbacks, no complications, no false-starts.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *iterate, adapt, adjust, course-correct, tweak, revise, morph, refactor, amend, fix.*

“*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.*”

—Winston Churchill

### Major errors

Have you made a major error, perhaps a complete misjudgment, incorrect strategic decision, or a project where months of effort by dozens of people has proved useless? That is indeed a big deal, and perhaps you’re even justified in saying “we failed.” Still, that doesn’t explain its nature, and doesn’t point towards a solution, which would be the constructive thing to do.

Words you could use instead of “fail” include: *Pivot, evolve, migrate, overhaul, revamp, transform, reconstruct, repurpose, reimagine, redesign, recreate, reinvent, reengineer, remodel, rebrand, realign.*

“*Success is not built on success. It’s built on failure. It’s built on frustration. Sometimes it’s built on catastrophe.*”

—Sumner Redstone

---

There are moments when we’ve truly, irrevocably, fatally failed, and we should say so. If a company has to shut down, especially before it achieved some meaningful success, then okay, we failed.

Otherwise, find a better way to describe what’s happening, so we understand the situation better, and are pointed in the direction of what we should do next.

“*Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm.*”

—Winston Churchill

---

Printed from: *A Smart Bear*

<https://longform.asmartbear.com/fail/>

© 2007-2023 Jason Cohen  @asmartbear