

# Study shows failure better teacher than success

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While success is surely sweeter than failure, it seems failure is a far better teacher, and organizations that fail spectacularly often flourish more in the long run, according to a new study by Vinit Desai, assistant professor of management at the University of Colorado Denver Business School.

Desai's research, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, focused on companies and organizations that launch satellites, rockets and shuttles into space - an arena where failures are high profile and hard to conceal.

Working with Peter Madsen, assistant professor at BYU School of Management, Desai found that organizations not only learned more from failure than [success](#), they retained that knowledge longer.

"We found that the knowledge gained from success was often fleeting while knowledge from failure stuck around for years," he said. "But there is a tendency in organizations to ignore failure or try not to focus on it. Managers may fire people or turn over the entire workforce while they should be treating the failure as a learning opportunity."

The researchers said they discovered little "significant organizational learning from success" but added "we do not discount the possibility that it may occur in other settings."

Desai compared the flights of the space shuttle Atlantis and the

Challenger. During the 2002 Atlantis flight, a piece of insulation broke off and damaged the left solid rocket booster but did not impede the mission or the program. There was little follow-up or investigation.

The Challenger was launched next and another piece of insulation broke off. This time the shuttle and its seven-person crew were destroyed.

The disaster prompted the suspension of shuttle flights and led to a major investigation resulting in 29 recommended changes to prevent future calamities.

The difference in response in the two cases, Desai said, came down to this: The Atlantis was considered a success and the Challenger a failure.

"Whenever you have a failure it causes a company to search for solutions and when you search for solutions it puts you as an executive in a different mindset, a more open mindset," said Desai.

He said the airline industry is one sector of the economy that has learned from failures, at least when it comes to safety.

"Despite crowded skies, airlines are incredibly reliable. The number of failures is miniscule," he said. "And past research has shown that older airlines, those with more experience in failure, have a lower number of accidents."

Desai doesn't recommend seeking out [failure](#) in order to learn. Instead, he advised organizations to analyze small failures and near misses to glean useful information rather than wait for major failures.

"The most significant implication of this study... is that organizational leaders should neither ignore failures nor stigmatize those involved with them," he concluded in the June edition of the [Academy of Management](#)

[Journal](#), "rather leaders should treat failures as invaluable learning opportunities, encouraging the open sharing of information about them."

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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