

"A master class in navigating failure."

—ANGELA DUCKWORTH, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Grit*

# Right Kind



# Wrong

THE SCIENCE OF  
FAILING WELL

AMY  
EDMONDSON

# Book review

## **“The Right Kind of Wrong” - Amy Edmondson**

Reviewed by: Ronald van Aggelen - Braintality

### **Introduction**

Edmondson has made her mark with her research on team performance, the learning organization and psychological safety. As a Harvard professor and thought leader she has engaged an audience worldwide.

The secret of her success lies in the combination of her engineering background and her endless curiosity for how people work together and how they perform. Her latest book is a logical continuation of her previous publications in which the search for successful teams within organizations is the focal point.

From the philosophy of “Organise to Learn” through the art of “Teaming” to the need for “Psychological Safety”. All aimed at creating an environment where failure is seen as the basis for learning and innovation.

The Right Kind of Wrong provides a wonderful insight into the world of making mistakes. Not from naivety, but from the art of learning. The structure of the scientist combined with numerous anecdotes and the panache of a keynote speaker make the book a wonderfully readable and inspiring piece.

It is obvious that Edmondson has tons of research experience. She makes it clear in an accessible way how we as humans must work hard to understand how our actions are connected on the one hand with prejudices and on the other hand with social psychological and neurological systems.

The book is full of stories and case studies to illustrate the scientific content. The diagrams and pictures show the coherence and logic in the story of making mistakes. The introduction is enough to get a full picture of the concept behind “the right kind of wrong”. A wonderful explanation of types of mistakes and our behavioral reflexes that quickly shows how mistakes lead to success.

## The Right Kind of Wrong. The science of failing well.

Right Kind of Wrong consists of two parts.

Part 1 describes the “failure landscape”. What types of failures are there? This varies from mistakes that you better avoid to mistakes that you should embrace because they take you further. Edmondson describes three types of failures: basic failures, complex failures, and intelligent failures. This typology provides a concrete handle for dealing with failure and the associated culture. Her point of view is that every mistake gives us the opportunity to learn and improve ourselves.

Part 2 is about practising the science of failing well. Edmondson describes how people deal with failure and how you can learn from it on your own. It focuses on the skills that help people learn. Especially when it comes to self-awareness, which is the key in learning, developing, and innovating.

According to Edmondson, our mission is to embrace human failure and enjoy the opportunity for a lifetime learning.

### Part 1: The Failure Landscape

The first part of Right Kind of Wrong consists of four chapters, each of which creates a framework for recognizing types of failures and being able to act accordingly. Because, as the title of the book suggests, what is good about making mistakes? How can we categorize that into the seriousness of failure, the impact, and the chance to learn from them? As human beings, we are poorly able to deal with our failures. We immediately know when we make them, but we also have mechanisms in our brain that allow us to flawlessly mask them:

1. We simply deny.
2. We change circumstances as an excuse.
3. We don't give in because we're afraid.

Our failures can be categorized into three types:

#### **Basic failures**

The mistakes we make even though there are agreements and protocols. We know how to get a result, but we don't.

#### **Complex failures**

An accumulation influenced by context and coherence. Edmondson gives five tips for recognizing and acting on complex failures:

1. Learn from the past
2. Be alert to an early signal
3. Immediately act on it
4. Learn from a false alarm
5. See the context

## **Intelligent failures.**

Failures where we enter unfamiliar territory and we discover what goes right. In addition, there must be a new field, a chance of success, and a small step to learn. You can only make intelligent mistakes if you are very well prepared, have done your homework and defined your hypothesis and your goals. Sincere curiosity is leading in this. Intelligent errors are “the right kind of wrong”.

Making mistakes is an elementary part of being human. But we wish only too much that we don't make them. We deny, we manipulate, and we blame others. Edmondson gives some tips to protect us from ourselves:

- Show vulnerability
- Ensure feedback in a safe environment
- Agree on the way you work
- Train yourself and others

## **Deel 2: Practicing the Science of Failing Well**

The second part also has four chapters. Focused on dealing with failure and the resulting learning curve.

As humans, we are designed to shift the blame onto others. Instinctively we try to keep every mistake away from us. Our ego gets in the way. In addition, our brains are designed to respond to threats. Even if we are no longer in a threatening prehistoric primeval world, the mechanisms remain the same. The perception of a threat is more common than the actual threat. The solution to this is described in the same way by scientists from different disciplines: Pause, take time, think, and reflect. This prevents an instant reaction that often leads to making mistakes.

A second strategy is “re-framing”. Framing is the phenomenon of a word or an image that immediately leads to a series of thoughts and associations that -by itself- lead to prejudice and behaviour. Re-framing is a difficult but very effective skill that prevents us from thinking in limitations.

Edmondson describes in this part of the book how much we put our focus on mistakes. It is not the positive feedback that sticks, but the criticism. Several studies have shown over and over again that people learn less from information about what went wrong than about what went right. The threat to the ego plays a decisive role in this.

Learning remains a challenge that, among other things, has to do with a mindset towards development. Edmondson often refers to scientists, such as Kahneman. In this part, she gives the stage to Carol Dweck. Who, with her concept of “fixed mindset” and “growth mindset”, touches the core of developmental work and life.

She quotes Larry Wilson to illustrate how self-counselling can lead people to a process of learning from failure: Stop. Challenge. Choose. In other words, take a break, assess your intuitive solution, and do something that will bring you closer to your goals.

The best and funny story in the book is about an experiment with a carpet. With compartments where participants search a route without making a "beep" sound. On the mat you can encounter the sound at various points. When you hear the beep you have to start over. The beep is the right kind of wrong. Experiment and learn so that next time you make it across without fail.

Part 2 concludes with chapters on the context of failures, the system side and human nature. Edmondson argues that if we accept that we are all fallible, we can open ourselves to learning experiences.

The book does not end with a test or an exam about the right kind of wrong. Edmondson closes with an invitation to keep practicing and thus contribute to the science of failure in a good way.

The right Kind of Wrong is a book that reads like a novel one moment, and the next with anecdotes that touch you in the beautiful scientific and conceptual context.

At Braintality, we use Edmondson's theory as a foundation to help organizations learn, accelerate innovation, and put strategies into practice in a learning environment.

Make  
strategy  
happen!