

BOOK REVIEWS

Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts With Failure*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011, 309 pp

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Ultimate success is almost always built on prolific failure. This more or less sums up in one sentence what Tim Harford's latest book is all about.

'Whatever its source, we need that willingness to risk failure,' Harford writes. 'Without it, we will never truly succeed. Experimenting can be a frightening process. We are constantly making mistakes, not knowing whether we are on the right lines.' (p 262)

Harford sees the implications of his ideas as far-reaching: 'Such problems are the stuff of this book: how to fight insurgents who, of course, fight back; how to nurture ideas that matter when so many of those ideas are hard to even imagine; how to restructure an economy to respond to climate change, or to make poor countries rich; how to prevent rogue investment bankers from destroying the banking system again.' (pp 4-5)

'Whenever such problems are solved, it is little short of a miracle,' Harford observes. 'This book is about how such miracles happen, why they matter so much, and whether we can make them happen more often.' (p 5) 'Progress comes from lots of experiments, many of which will fail. This book argues that failure is both necessary and useful.' (p 184)

Harford infuses numerous examples from a variety of different areas throughout his book, which serve to heighten the reader's interest in the issues under consideration. One company he mentions at several points in the narrative is Google. 'If any company can be said to embrace trying new things in the expectation that many will fail, it is Google,' the author asserts. 'As long as the company doesn't pour too much

money into failing products, the few big successes seem to justify the many experiments. The company's corporate strategy is to have no corporate strategy.' (p 234)

Moreover, his ideas seem to be as applicable to individuals as to organizations. He is particularly aggressive in his advocacy for prototyping and trial-and-error problem solving. 'Accepting trial and error means accepting error,' Harford explains. 'It means taking problems in our stride when a decision doesn't work out, whether through luck or misjudgment. And that is not something human brains seem to be able to do without a struggle.' (p 31)

'But whether we like it or not, trial and error is a tremendously powerful process for solving problems in a complex world, while expert leadership is not,' he adds (p 20).

Harford's point seems to be that leaders need to recognize their limitations and give their followers a relatively wide berth when it comes to the decision-making process. The truth is that many times the precursors to significant innovations tend to fail miserably. The trick is to learn from the mistakes encountered along the way in order to achieve eventual success.

The author concedes that our best hope for solving many of today's complex problems lies more with groups working in concert than with individuals working in isolation; it is how well we work with others, not how well we work for others, that will characterize our ultimate success or failure.

In explaining the increasing importance of collaboration in the private sector as well as in education, he argues that 'In academia, too, teams are starting

to dominate across the board. Solo researchers used to produce the most highly cited research, but now that distinction belongs to teams of researchers.' (p 92)

The book is exceptionally well researched, with no less than 31 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the eight chapters that comprise the main text. This gives credibility to Harford's work and distances it from many of the management and self-help books that tend to occupy most of the shelf space at popular bookstores.

At the same time, the book is not flawless. Although the author is generally clear as he articulates his vision for the future, occasionally he uses language that assumes the reader has a more comprehensive understanding of economic, political and even psychological theories and processes than may actually be the case. Sometimes he assumes that everyone understands cultural references that seem to be particular to certain geographical locations. His description of the management system at Timpson, 'one of the UK's least glamorous brands' (p 226), seems to fall into this category.

It is obvious that Harford writes for a global audience and this is one of the key strengths of *Adapt*. His examples, illustrations and case studies are world-wide in scope. Some authors, when developing this kind of book, tend to focus on the implications for the more industrialized countries. In contrast, Harford goes out of his way to be more inclusive in his approach to the subject matter. He makes it clear that companies anywhere can benefit from adopting the philosophy and approach he describes so articulately in this, his latest bestseller.

'The ability to adapt requires an inner confidence that the cost of failure is a cost we will be able to bear,' Harford concludes. 'Sometimes that takes real courage; at other times all that is needed is the happy self-delusion of a lost three-year-old.' (p 262)

Harford wants us to have, and never lose, both.

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