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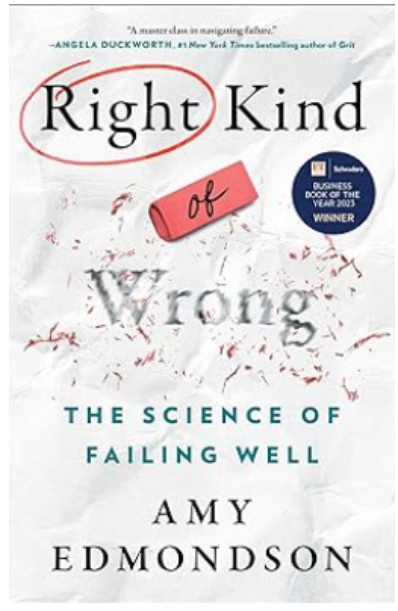
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Book Review
Right Kind of Wrong – The Science of Failing Well (2023, ISBN10: 1982195061)

Author: Amy Edmondson; Published by: Simon Acumen

Reviewer: S. Sathyanarayana

Amy Edmondson's *Right Kind of Wrong* is a timely contribution to the management and leadership literature, particularly in an era where "fail fast, fail often" has become a fashionable mantra. As a professor at Harvard Business School and a leading scholar on psychological safety, Edmondson brings both intellectual authority and practical insight to a subject that is often oversimplified. Rather than glorifying all types of failure, she distinguishes between harmful failures that should be minimized and "intelligent" failures that should be encouraged. While the book has strong conceptual clarity and practical utility, its arguments also raise important questions about applicability, cultural fit, and the risk of managerial rhetoric outpacing real organisational change.



Strengths of the Book

One of the book's most compelling contributions is its classification of failures into three categories: basic, complex, and intelligent. Basic failures are preventable and often result from carelessness or lack of preparation; complex failures arise when multiple factors interact unpredictably; intelligent failures occur in new territory, where experiments and risk-taking are necessary to generate new knowledge.

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This taxonomy brings nuance to discussions of failure, allowing managers to differentiate between errors that reveal negligence and those that foster innovation. Unlike much management literature that reduces failure to either "good" or "bad," Edmondson offers a more sophisticated framework for thinking about when failure should be avoided and when it should be embraced.

Another strength lies in her integration of research on psychological safety with the theme of failure. Edmondson has long argued that environments where people feel safe to speak up and make mistakes without fear of punishment are more innovative and resilient. *Right Kind of Wrong* extends this line of thought, showing how leaders can intentionally cultivate cultures where intelligent failures are recognized as valuable learning opportunities. The book is filled with case studies from business, healthcare, and science that illustrate how organisations that normalise experimentation tend to outperform those that stigmatize mistakes. This emphasis on culture, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics grounds the book in the messy realities of organisational life rather than abstract theory alone.

Finally, Edmondson succeeds in bridging theory with practice. She does not simply argue that failures should be accepted; she provides actionable strategies for leaders to frame failures constructively, distinguish learning opportunities from negligence, and design "safe-to-fail" experiments. In this way, the book resists the trap of being purely conceptual. It offers a practical toolkit for managers, educators, and leaders navigating environments where uncertainty and complexity are unavoidable.

Critical Reflections and Limitations

Despite these strengths, the book is not without limitations. A key issue is its organisational bias. Much of the evidence and examples are drawn from large, resource-rich organisations, many of which are in Western contexts. While this makes the book appealing to corporate executives, it raises questions about applicability in less privileged contexts. Small firms, educational institutions, or non-profit organizations may lack the resources to create controlled "intelligent failures" without incurring serious risk. The optimistic framing of failure as a learning tool may not resonate in environments where failure carries existential consequences.

Another critique concerns the overlap with Edmondson's earlier work. Readers familiar with her influential research on psychological safety may find parts of *Right Kind of Wrong* repetitive. While the taxonomy of failure is new, the central message that organisations must cultivate safe spaces for risk-taking and learning feels like an extension rather than a radical departure from her previous books and articles. For some readers, this may reduce the sense of novelty. The book also underestimates the deep cultural and emotional resistance to embracing failure. Edmondson acknowledges the role of shame, fear, and blame in preventing openness to failure, but the strategies she offers sometimes appear overly rationalistic. Telling leaders to "frame failures as learning opportunities" or to "reward intelligent risks" is important but does not fully address entrenched norms, power dynamics, or cultural traditions that stigmatize mistakes. In hierarchical or collectivist cultures, where "saving face" is critical, the transition toward embracing intelligent failure may be far

more complex than Edmondson suggests. The emotional and cultural labour required for such a shift is downplayed.

Additionally, while Edmondson distinguishes intelligently between types of failure, the practical boundary between them can blur. For instance, a failure may be classified as "intelligent" by one leader but as "negligent" by another, depending on how expectations and accountability are defined. This raises the risk that the taxonomy, while elegant in theory, could be inconsistently applied in practice. Without robust safeguards, organisations might use the language of "intelligent failure" to mask recklessness or excuse poor planning.

Broader Implications

The critical strength of Edmondson's book lies in its relevance to contemporary challenges. In a world of rapid technological change, uncertainty, and disruption, the ability to experiment and learn from mistakes is crucial. Her arguments resonate not only in corporate management but also in fields like education, healthcare, and scientific research. For higher education, for example, the book has important implications: universities often penalize failure through rigid grading systems and research cultures that reward only "positive" results. Adopting Edmondson's framework could allow institutions to reimagine failure as an essential part of learning and discovery.

However, this also highlights the book's broader dilemma: embracing failure sounds attractive in theory, but translating it into practice requires shifts in incentives, structures, and cultural norms that are difficult to achieve. Without these systemic changes, there is a risk that "failing well" becomes a managerial slogan rather than a lived reality.

Conclusion

Right Kind of Wrong is an insightful, accessible, and relevant book that makes a strong case for rethinking how individuals and organisations approach failure. Edmondson's nuanced taxonomy, combined with her emphasis on psychological safety, gives leaders a powerful framework for separating destructive mistakes from valuable experiments. At the same time, the book invites critical reflection about its applicability across contexts, the challenges of cultural resistance, and the risk of rhetorical adoption without substantive change. For readers seeking a balanced perspective on failure neither demonising it nor glorifying it Edmondson's book is an excellent resource. Yet, as with any management trend, the challenge lies not in the elegance of the concept but in the messy realities of practice.