

YAY!
QUESTIONS
&
CELEBRATION GRIDS



It's important that someone celebrate our existence... People are the only mirror we have to see ourselves in. The domain of all meaning. All virtue, all evil, are contained only in people. There is none in the universe at large.

Lois McMaster Bujold,
American author
(1949-)

Does your organization appreciate the things you've learned? Do you applaud colleagues who do their jobs well? All too often, organizations live day by day, from one crisis to another, and they forget to take note of the good things that happened. By asking two important questions, and drawing a celebration grid, you can look for things to treasure.

A few years ago, I discussed some organizational challenges with my former CEO. I noted that the employees in our company rarely took time to enjoy their successes. People were always working hard and they never seemed to celebrate the things that went well. I suggested that maybe we should have a big bell in the office, so that we could ring it whenever there was something to celebrate. The idea of a bell came to my mind because I wanted something that would be visible, inviting, and impossible to ignore when used.

One week later, to my surprise, the CEO brought me a copper ship's bell and said, "Here's your bell. Now do something useful with it." 🚩 I convinced the office manager to hang it in the middle of our big open office space and I let everyone in the company know that every employee was allowed to ring the bell if they had something to celebrate. (I later heard of a similar practice with a cow bell instead of a ship's bell, in other organizations. [Robin and Burchell, *No Excuses* loc:589])

From that moment, every few weeks or so, someone would enthusiastically yank on the rope. The bell would be rung for signing a government contract, for deploying a web application, or for doing something less strenuous, such as running a marathon or giving birth to a baby. Any reason was valid. (I once rang the bell for having more visitors on my blog than the company had on its website. It was just an excuse to enjoy another celebration.)

When the sound of the ship's bell chimed through the office, all employees immediately got together for a ten-minute celebration. Our people knew that the bell was often a signal for free cake or cookies, which probably contributed to the quick gathering of the entire work force around the coffee machine. The person who rang the bell then usually took a few minutes to explain what was being celebrated, followed by enthusiastic applause. Yay! And then the eating started. The last time I heard the bell was when the CEO announced that I was quitting my job.



Every employee was allowed to ring the bell if they had something to celebrate.

Successor Failure

Before we turn to a deeper discussion about good reasons for celebrations, I think it's necessary to consider the relevance of success and failure.

The first (and last) time I organized a school party, together with a fellow pupil, it was a terrible disaster. The kids in my class unanimously agreed that it was boring and they all left early. We call that a **failure**. The outcome was not what we had intended. In my defense, I can only say I had never organized a school party before and that we learned a great deal. For example, I learned that 30 kids will *not* dance to the shrieks of Barbra Streisand when played from one flimsy cassette recorder.

The first (and hopefully last) time I organized a wedding, together with my spouse, the results were positively memorable. People called it a great **success**. The two astounding wedding locations, and the three different outfits we appeared in, are fixed forever in everyone's memories.  Again, I had never done this before, and we learned many things. For example, I learned that 100 guests *would* dance if you included at least one song by the Village People, played on professional equipment, and supported by swirling balloons, soap bubbles, and laser lights.

If we organized another wedding (which we won't), we would probably repeat many of the things we did the first time. Basically, we would follow a "recipe for success" or, in other words, a number of **good practices** that we have discovered. Obviously, no matter what you do, there is never a *guarantee* for success. You just use recipes and practices to increase your *chances* of success.

If I organized another school party (even less likely than another wedding) and I applied the same approach as I did the first time, it would be a big **mistake** or a "recipe for disaster". A mistake is something you do despite knowing that it will probably not work. When you make a mistake, you learn nothing. [Godin, "The Difference between a Failure and a Mistake"] OK, that may not be entirely true. You *might* learn that you're an idiot because you wasted time validating that, just like last time, your approach still doesn't work.





Experimental Learning

Some writers claim that “we only learn from failure” or that we should “allow ourselves to fail”. [Fast Company, “Celebrate Failure”] Some say we should celebrate mistakes because they help us to be more creative and innovative. [Kjerulf, “Top 5 Reasons to Celebrate Mistakes at Work”] There are even congregations of people with the sole purpose of applauding each other’s mistakes and failures. [Buchanan, “Welcome to the Church of Fail”] Interestingly enough, other writers claim that we should “focus on successes” and that “success breeds success”. [Fried, “Failure Is Overrated”] This raises the question whether we should celebrate successes *and* failures—in other words, celebrate everything. The truth is, quite literally, right in the middle.

Information theorists have discovered that systems learn most when failure rates are around 50 percent. [Reinertsen, *Principles of Product Development Flow* loc:1512] In other words, when your experiments have a good chance of succeeding *and* a good chance of failing, they generate the most information for you to learn from.

Either excessive or insufficient probability of failure reduces the efficiency with which we generate information. [...] Avoid oversimplifications, like “eliminate failures” or “celebrate failures.” There is an optimum failure rate.

Reinertsen, *Principles of Product Development Flow* loc:1512

**We should celebrate learning,
not successes or failures.**

We learn the most when we can’t predict whether our experiments will lead to good or bad outcomes. Apparently, failure and success are both needed for learning. What we learn from the most are the experiences we’ve never had before, such as (in my case) organizing a school party or a wedding. When all we do is repeat established practices, it is hard to know if we could do any better. Likewise, if all we do is make the same mistakes, then we’re not learning much either. Optimal learning happens somewhere in the middle; it happens when you frequently think, “I didn’t know this but I’m glad I found out because now I can do better!”

No amount of examples of successes or failures is indicative of one’s potential performance. It all depends on your own effort and understanding of your own problems.

Deming, *Out of the Crisis* pag:128

A learning organization should not aim to minimize the amount of failure. Reducing failure would reduce learning. Of course, maximizing failure also makes no sense. What we should maximize is the *understanding* of our problems. This understanding happens by experiencing both successes and failures. There is an optimal learning rate when you think “Wow, I’m brilliant!” and “My God, I’m such an idiot!” roughly in equal measure. Therefore, we should celebrate learning, not successes or failures.



Good Practices

In many working environments, people usually focus on fixing problems. This makes sense because continuous improvement allows organizations to survive and thrive. However, a focus on things that could be improved usually comes down to a focus on failures and mistakes, and this mindset can have some serious side effects. Being a perfectionist, I have sometimes been guilty of this myself. I have “raised the bar” for me and for others until the bar was so high that Godzilla could do a limbo dance underneath it while carrying a space shuttle.

However, I noticed a strange thing when I urged people to stop screwing up. I found this didn’t motivate them at all! I realized getting better isn’t just about reducing what goes *wrong* (making mistakes). It’s also about increasing what goes *right* (using good practices). And every now and then, people need a reminder that they’re doing just fine. 📅

It’s no wonder the culture in many organizations feels negative when the focus of discussions is mainly on mistakes and problems. Workers feel they are held accountable for not being perfect. Instead of having a constructive view of improvement, people end up with a defensive frame of mind. They avoid taking responsibility, and, for every perceived problem they point at others who must have caused it. Because people’s minds are focused on self-defense instead of improvement, things will not get any better and the organization will just make more mistakes.



We should celebrate good practices,
not punish mistakes.

I believe we should emphasize the good practices over the mistakes because you get more of what you focus on. [Alberg, “How to Celebrate Success throughout Your Projects”; Eckel, “You Get What You Measure”] If you focus on mistakes, people will make more mistakes. If you focus on good practices, people will invent more good practices.

By emphasizing good practices, and even ritualizing them, you also make it possible to free up people’s mental power so they have more time for the more complex and uncertain aspects of their work. For example, quality checklists often have beneficial effects for creative networkers, not only because they help to keep the quality of products and services high, but also because they enable workers to think of more interesting problems to solve and experiments to run. [Gawande, *Checklist Manifesto*]

It seems evident to me that we should emphasize the good behaviors, not the bad ones. We should celebrate good practices, not punish mistakes.



Am I allowed to offer people some criticism?

Yes, you are! Constructive criticism can be quite useful (see the chapter “Feedback Wrap”); though, research has shown that negative feedback is more effective for experts than for novices. [Grant Halvorson, “Sometimes Negative Feedback Is Best”] It’s OK to let novices know when they made a mistake, but their performance will increase much faster when you focus on their good behaviors. It appears that experts will usually have more appreciation for knowing where they went wrong, but they welcome a pat on the back every now and then as well.

Two Questions

We've now seen that there are two possible reasons for celebrations. We can celebrate when we have *learned* something, regardless of whether the outcome was a success or a failure, and we can celebrate when we repeat *good practices*, probably resulting in a predictably good outcome. I call the accompanying illustration a **celebration grid** (also see chapter "Salary Formula").  In this diagram, the areas of potential celebrations are colored green (regions B, C and E). This area is called the *celebration zone*.

As a great management workout exercise, you can help people to focus on the proper areas in the celebration grid by asking them these two "yay!" questions:

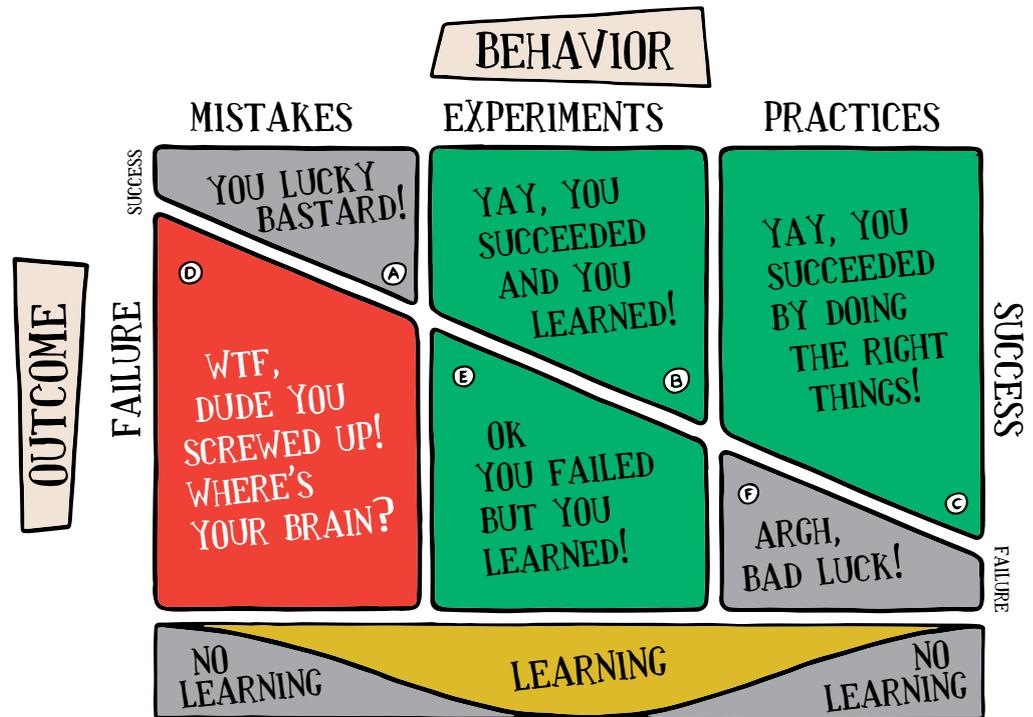
1. What did we do well? (by following practices)
2. What did we learn? (by running experiments)

Instead of questioning things that went wrong, it's often better to ask what worked well.  [McCrimmon, "Celebrating Success at Work"] This emphasizes that you want to share good recipes, not mistakes. It's OK for people to discuss practices that are already widely known. Reinforcing good

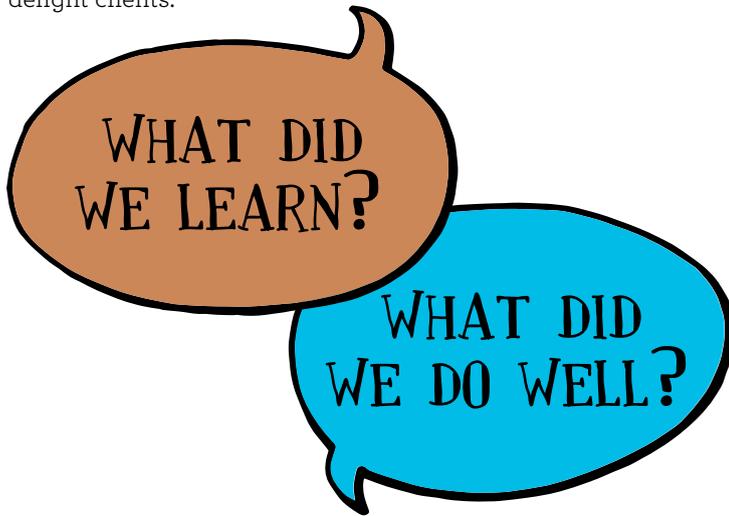
recipes makes it more likely that others will apply them too (region C). Even when, despite people's best efforts, the outcome of a good practice was a failure, you may still consider celebrating that at least they did their best (region F).

The second question  is about the tests and experiments that people performed

where they couldn't easily predict the outcome. It is important that both successes and failures are discussed in equal measure because, while it is true that you can learn much from failure, it's also true that you learn a lot from success. That's why your attention should be divided equally between both (regions B and E).



The two questions are both reasons to celebrate. You celebrate to reinforce good behaviors and you celebrate to reinforce learning. Both are necessary when your aim is to engage people, improve work, and delight clients.



When you have regular meetings with colleagues, such as one-on-ones, stand-up meetings, retrospectives, or weekly Skype calls, I suggest you make it a habit of starting with these two “yay!” questions. Starting conversations with these questions has several benefits. First, it gives people permission to brag a little about their good work and what they learned. This helps them to feel good about themselves. By emphasizing positive things, the atmosphere will improve, and people will feel more at ease, so they can talk about some of their failures and mistakes later on.

Second, it motivates people to be mindful about the good recipes they applied and the things they learned, so they have something to share in the next conversation. Everyone should understand that their job is not just to reduce mistakes and failures. It’s also to learn good practices and share them with their colleagues.

Actually,
this all sounds quite familiar!

Indeed, the same questions exist in other contexts too. For example, change management experts know that one of the first questions to ask in any change program is, “Where are things going well?” closely followed by “How do we get feedback?” [Appelo, *How to Change the World*] They are very similar questions, but in a different format. Another example is the *Perfection Game*, a useful feedback technique for trainers and facilitators. It asks people “How well do you like what we did?” followed by “If it’s not perfect, how can we do even better?” [McCarthy, *Software for your Head*; Van Cauwenberghe, “We Expect Nothing Less Than Perfection”] Again, they are two similar questions but with a slightly different angle.

Celebrate Work

Any answers to these two questions could be a trigger for a celebration. 🎉 Has the new employee correctly inserted the foobar into the goobase? Celebrate! Did a team member's daring experiment result in a great insight? Yay! Applaud the one who valiantly helped a customer with an important software workaround that saved her data, even though it regrettably got fifty other customers disconnected. Perhaps you even want to ring the bell for the person who stupidly deleted all the invoices because it enabled the network administrators to improve their backup procedures.

In some environments, when you start asking these two questions, positive events are harder to find than a Cobol programmer participating in a Miss Universe contest. Maybe that's because there isn't that much good news to share in the first place, or maybe it's because people don't consider their good behaviors and learning outcomes to be worth celebrating. I suggest you don't take what people do for granted. Make every small step worth mentioning.

Don't take what people do for granted.
Make every small step worth mentioning.

When you celebrate things, keep the following suggestions in mind:

1. **Celebrate frequently.** Every day can be a day to ask these two questions. Every day can be a reason to celebrate. Don't just drool all over the big achievements. Pay attention to the small things too. When everyone is on time for a meeting, celebrate! When the CEO published her first blog post, "Yay!" When Juanita didn't swear for a whole week, "Woohoo!"
2. **Celebrate noticeably.** Make sure celebrations are visible (or loud), so that everyone can see (or hear) what is being celebrated and why. Turn your celebrations into information radiators. With a bit of luck, other parts of the organization will follow your good example. It is hard not to go with the flow when a good vibe washes all over you.
3. **Celebrate remarkably.** Target multiple senses with your celebrations. Be remarkable by introducing your own unique rituals. You can ring a bell, throw confetti, launch balloons, share chocolates, or flash some disco lights, and play a song by the Village People. By turning celebrations into little rituals, they will become part of the organizational culture.

When I wrote the first draft of this chapter I scheduled a visit to my former employer's office. The bell was still there. I was glad to learn that they had rung it just a week earlier to celebrate an important product release and the five-year anniversaries of several employees who, unlike me, did *not* leave the company.



From done to celebrate

“We have a Kanban board that visualizes our workflow and periodically our tasks move from *In Work* to *Done*. Sometimes we celebrate getting tasks to Done with a “hurray” and then we move the sticky notes to a big Done area on the whiteboard. But now I am thinking I can draw your celebration grid on the whiteboard in the Done area. When stickies move to Done, we put them into the appropriate region of the celebration grid and let learning and celebration commence.

Geoffrey Lowney, *United States*

Better retrospectives

“I thought that it might be a great idea to use the celebration grid as a framework for organizing team retrospectives. So, I tried it out with a Scrum team with which I had been working by drawing the diagram on a white board and discussing the concept of how most learning occurs through experiments. I suggested that we could use the diagram as a way to structure the retrospective to get us in a mode of thinking about what we are actually learning. The team agreed that it looked like a promising approach.

I asked the team to take ten minutes to write on sticky notes the mistakes, experiments, and good practices they had identified. When time was up, the team members placed the stickies on the grid in the appropriate locations and we had a conversation on our findings and new ideas. During the team conversation, we identified additional experiments to put on the board and the team committed to several process improvements.

The retrospective went extremely well. The feedback from the team was very positive. Every person thought it was the best retrospective that they had attended. For me, it was by far the best that I had facilitated. We think the celebration grid provided a great visual framework, and the concepts of experimenting, learning, and celebrating gave real direction, meaning, and purpose to the retrospective.”

Robie Wood, *United States*

YELLOW
MISTAKES

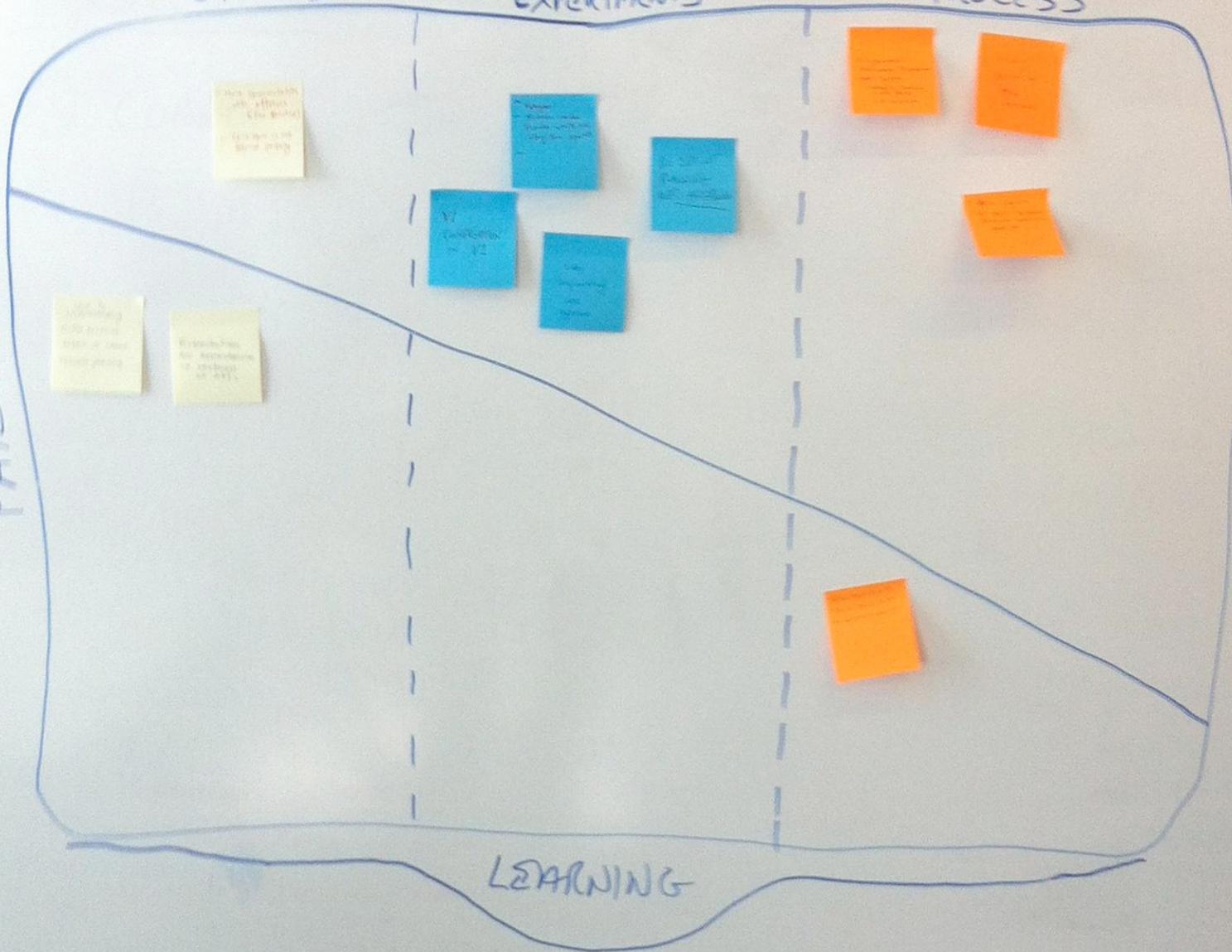
BLUE
EXPERIMENTS

ORANGE
PROCESS

FAILURE

SUCCESS

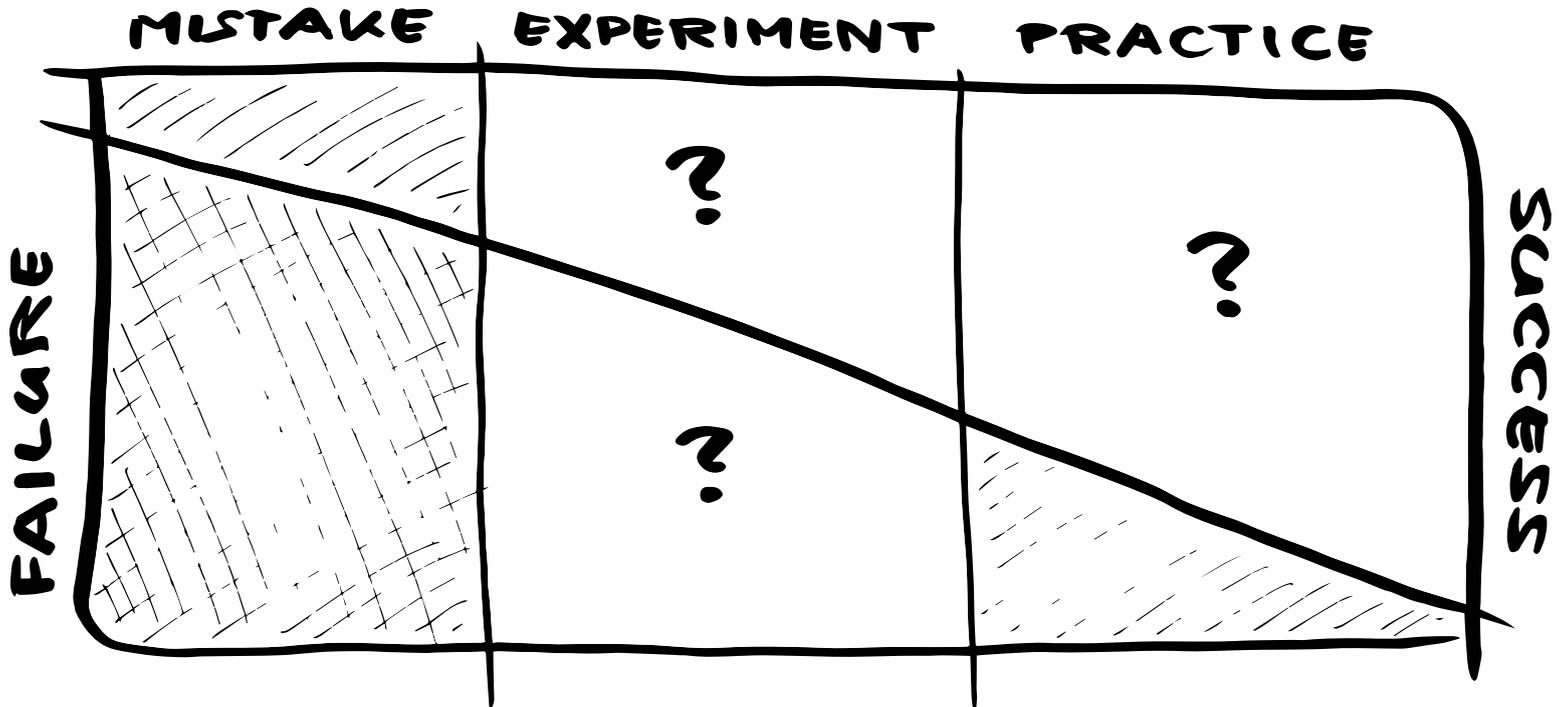
LEARNING



What now?

Try this when you want to get started celebrating things:

1. Draw the celebration grid on a whiteboard  and discuss it.
2. For each of the regions, ask people for a few concrete examples so that you might learn from all mistakes, experiments, and practices, no matter whether you failed or succeeded.
3. At the start or at the end of your meetings, try asking the two questions, “What did we do well?” and “What did we learn?”
4. Decide how you’re going to celebrate what you learned and what you practiced, in a way that is noticeable, remarkable, and fun.



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Delivering Happiness

Get the culture right and everything else just falls into place.

-Tony Hsieh



CHANGE *your* WORLD
CHANGE *the* WORLD

Why happiness?

It's a universal belief most people just want to be happy in their lives. Yet the research shows we're really bad at predicting the things that actually make us happy. (How's that for Irony-with-a-capital-I?!)

Backed by studies being done within the science of happiness and positive psychology, we've learned that there are tangible ways to augment the happiness in our lives.

That's where Delivering Happiness comes in.

We exist to help people, companies and communities apply the different frameworks of happiness to their lives.

Check out our **Hello doc** (<http://m30.me/dh>) for all the ways Delivering Happiness is inspiring, connecting, and engaging organizations and businesses around the world, or shoot us an email at chat@deliveringhappiness.com to learn more!

Live life on the sunny side

Breakfast Links by Delivering Happiness will deliver a fresh, hot plate of happiness to your inbox! Stay on top of what's new in company culture, see how others are following their passion + purpose, and be inspired right along with us. Sign up at www.deliveringhappiness.com.

Happiness at work results from your own actions, those of other employees, and the organization itself... In order to change THE world, we first must change OUR worlds. And that changes starts here — with you.

Do you need more WOWBELL?

The Delivering Happiness Wowbell is a melodious way to raise the roof on your team's wins and dones! You don't just need more cowbell, you need more WOWBELL!