

My Take: Failing Toward Success

Written by Jane Alexander, Editor-In-Chief
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Driving to my Chicagoland office each morning, I tend to zone out when the local business news hits the radio. One recent item, however, caught my ear.

It was about Schaumburg, IL-based Motorola showing improvement in some of its third-quarter financial results. The news reminded me of a reference made to the company during a broadcast of the radio news-magazine, *Eight Forty-Eight*, several days earlier.

The discussion was on the 2009 Chicago Innovation Awards (www.chicagoinnovationawards.com). During this year's awards ceremony, several members of the Motorola team that worked on the development of the cell phone were introduced to the audience. From what I gathered, this may have been one of the first times, if not THE first time, that these particular gentlemen had ever been publicly recognized for their help in bringing an actual working cell phone—*that infernal appendage to which many of us are almost surgically attached* —to the masses.

According to a number of tidbits rounded up from the Web, by coming up with the concept of small cells, along with an automatic switchover system for rolling phones from one cell to another, Bell Labs is generally acknowledged as having invented cellular "technology" (starting on it way back in 1947). But it was Dr. Martin Cooper, as general manger of Motorola's Communications Systems Division, who worked to build a relatively small phone that a person could carry. He placed the first public telephone call on one weighing a whopping 30 ounces, on April 3, 1973. Following this public demonstration, he and Motorola embarked on a 10-year quest to bring portable cell phones to market. The company first introduced the 16-oz. "DynaTac" into commercial service in 1983 (at a cost of \$3500). It took seven more years before there were a million U.S. subscribers. These days, there are more cellular subscribers than land-line subscribers, and the devices themselves barely weigh anything at all. My point, though, is that neither Bell Labs nor Cooper worked alone to make cell phones part of our cultural landscape. Furthermore, it seems to have taken a number of years for everyone to get where they wanted to go. In other words, there must have been some failing along the way.

Which brings me to something else that has recently piqued my interest... "FailCon," a gosh-darn conference devoted to failure. As someone who used to remind my parents that "Einstein failed math" every time I brought home a bad report card, I was all over this! I couldn't

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wait to see why the blogosphere was characterizing FailCon as "a big success."

Apparently, this one-day, sold-out, Silicon-Valley event (held in San Francisco) was not convened to celebrate failure, but rather to help attendees learn to embrace it—*and learn from it*. Speakers reportedly shared insight gained from their own failures and how they later went on to craft effective (and lucrative) business models because of them.

Paraphrasing a key, but quite modest member of another team—*the one that began moving the Internet into our lives 40 years ago*—

successful innovation has many fathers (and, I'll add, "lots of mothers, too")! Few great things happen overnight, and there seems to be plenty of darkness before the dawn. That said, I would be interested in hearing from you and/or your teams about your own experiences in failing toward success. I bet you have some compelling stories to tell!

MT



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