Stanford eCorner

Pro-Learning, Not Pro-Failure

Astro Teller, *X*

April 20, 2016

Video URL: http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/4211/Pro-Learning-Not-Pro-Failure

Astro Teller, director of Alphabet's moonshot factory, X, distinguishes pointless failure from the kind of failure that leads to insights that can accelerate innovation. He explains how the time spent figuring out how to do something is in fact learning. "I'm not pro-failure. I'm pro-learning," he says. "We mean find incredibly efficient ways to learn."

Transcript

- The word failure and trying to get people to fail is a bit of a misnomer. First of all it's missing this path of least resistance issue because people don't want to do it. Failure, when it's actually just you got a negative result for no reason and it's meaningless, is a bad thing. I am not pro failure, I'm pro learning. Another thing that we talk about a lot at X, you guys can all probably run this experiment in your own mind especially if you've been at work somewhere for at least a few years. Imagine a project that took a non-trivial amount of time to do, at least months. Think about when you were done, you and probably a group of other people, but even just by yourself. When you're done, you lose all the code, all the tools, whatever it is, but you still remember having finished and what it took to finish it. If you had to build it from scratch, whatever it was that's in your mind right now, how long would that really take to do it again? 10% of the time as the first time? We have a name for the other 90%, and we could call it wasted time, but that's not really what it was. You were learning what the right thing to do is.

Innovation is that 90%. It's how much you can either compress the time in that 90% or compress the cost of that 90%. That's it, that's innovation. That's why failure matters. That's why we send people out to fail, but we don't mean go not be good. That's not what we mean by suggesting that failure is positive. We mean find incredibly efficient ways to learn, time efficient or cost efficient ways to learn. Then you have to create these opportunities for them to feel good about it, like some of the ones that I just described to you.