

## Engineering Inclusion: The Power of Embracing Failure

When I reflect on the challenges of building a more inclusive and welcoming community, I think of a quote from one of my favorite films, *Apollo 13*. In it, Ed Harris, portraying Flight Director Gene Kranz, famously declares, “**Failure is not an option!**” as engineers scramble to bring the astronauts safely home. Though the phrase is often celebrated as a mark of perseverance, it reflects a broader societal mindset that can conflict with efforts to foster diversity and inclusion—the belief that failure in any form is unacceptable, and that anything less than perfection is disreputable. **This mindset can be dangerous.** One of the most striking examples of the dangers of denying the possibility of failure is the catastrophic explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Investigations later revealed that leadership’s refusal to accept anything short of success played a critical role in the disaster. Their hubris and unwillingness to acknowledge potential risks or shortcomings led to devastating consequences.

While I do not suggest that such a culture exists at Haley & Aldrich, I believe that fostering true diversity requires actively rejecting the mindset that “failure is not an option.” Building a diverse workforce means hiring individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, many of whom have faced systemic barriers. For example, public school districts with greater proportions of racially diverse students receive less funding than predominantly white districts<sup>1</sup>. As a result, students from underfunded areas often enter the workforce less prepared, increasing their vulnerability to anxiety and fear of failure – particularly in environments where perfection is the implicit standard. **I suggest that failure must not only be accepted but embraced as a natural and inevitable part of growth.** A workplace where individuals feel safe to take risks, learn from mistakes, and try again without fear of punishment is one where employees from diverse backgrounds can truly thrive. Encouraging experimentation, even at the risk of failure, opens the door to new perspectives and ideas, fostering innovation and progress.

Interestingly, even at NASA – despite the mythology surrounding the *Apollo 13* mission – failure is, in fact, an option. The Space Shuttle program experienced a 1.5% flight failure rate, with two of its five shuttles ending in tragic disaster. Yet, NASA’s crewed spaceflight program has endured, and the U.S. space program remains a global leader. This resilience, I believe, stems from a culture that views failure not as the end, but as an opportunity to learn and improve.

[1] Lombardo, Clare. “Why White School Districts Have So Much More Money.” *NPR*, NPR, 26 Feb. 2019, [www.npr.org/2019/02/26/696794821/why-white-school-districts-have-so-much-more-money?fbclid=IwAR1aSq8wmfpmL\\_yeyV7Qk11SsDmQC\\_qlggQnPUZ1-oAyngsCZtfsPJ6SCQ](http://www.npr.org/2019/02/26/696794821/why-white-school-districts-have-so-much-more-money?fbclid=IwAR1aSq8wmfpmL_yeyV7Qk11SsDmQC_qlggQnPUZ1-oAyngsCZtfsPJ6SCQ).