

VISIONS

Publisher

Brad Barbera, NPDP
 PDMA Executive Director
 312.673.5710

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dennis Coyle
 312.673.4909

**Managing Editor**

Kelly Rehan
 312.673.4889

**Art Director**

Steve Biernacki

Advertising Sales

Rebecca Baker
 312.673.5827


**Product Development and
 Management Association (PDMA)**

330 N. Wabash Avenue, Suite 2000
 Chicago, IL 60611 USA
 Phone: 312.321.5145
 Fax: 312.673.6885

**About Visions**

Visions™, the flagship magazine of the Product Development and Management Association (PDMA), is published four times a year and keeps PDMA members informed of news and trends in the new product development world and the latest thinking of leaders in product development and innovation.

Visions is an exclusive PDMA member benefit. Each member receives a complimentary subscription to the digital edition and print subscriptions are available to only members at \$35 per year.

To submit news items, story ideas or manuscripts for publication consideration, contact any of the editors via email or phone (see contact information above). Publication of any article or advertisement in this publication should not be considered an endorsement of the opinions expressed or products advertised. Statements of fact and opinion are the responsibility of the authors alone and do not imply approval or endorsement on the part of the officers, membership or staff of PDMA or *Visions*.

Copyright 2013 by PDMA. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Innovators are Failures

Brad Barbera, NPDP



“When we focus too much on doing things perfectly, we don’t engage in the kind of exploratory thinking and behavior that creates new knowledge and innovation.”

—Heidi Grant Halvorson

Thomas Edison enters the office of his manager in response to an email marked with a red “high importance” exclamation point. The subject line: Project Lightbulb Update Required. He takes a seat across from his boss’ desk and waits for the manager to speak.

Manager: Tom, I’m not seeing a great deal of progress on this “Project Lightbulb.” You’ve failed to make anything we could possibly sell.

Edison: I haven’t failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that don’t work.

Manager: Yeah, well, we’re paying you to find ways that do work. I think it’s about time we give up on this one.

Edison: Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.

Manager: Sorry, but the folks in the C-Suite think the most certain way to succeed is to launch something on time for the Wal-Mart shelf reset. And I’ve got nothing to show them.

Edison: To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.

Manager: Well, what I need is to get some revenue out of all the research you’re doing! We’ve spent a fortune so far, with no sign of any fortune coming back.

Edison: Good fortune is what happens when opportunity meets with planning.

Manager: Yeah, well, I think you ought to take this opportunity to start planning a résumé update.

So, in the real world, how do you handle your Thomas Edisons? It’s easy to stereotype managers as short-sighted fools who would have prevented Edison from making the incandescent bulb commercially practical. What isn’t easy is managing such situations. The pressures to make money are real. Deadlines are real. Resource limitations are real. Uncertainty and chaos are real. The consequences

of failure are real.

PDMA Foundation’s 2012 Comparative Performance Assessment Survey (CPAS) shows that in an innovation culture, one of the components that separates “the best” from “the rest” is an understanding of failure. What does such understanding entail? It requires encouraging “good failure,” discouraging “bad failure” and recognizing the difference between the two.

Good failure is what comes from making educated choices, taking calculated risks and striving for excellence, even if ultimately coming up short. Encouraging, embracing or even just tolerating good failure is crucial to leading an innovation team. Failing fast is a key part of the Lean and Agile development philosophies. It is not failure for failure’s sake, but for the sake of learning, improving and optimizing.

Discouraging bad failure is the flip side of the coin. Bad failure is the kind that comes from carelessness and unchecked assumptions; the kind of thing that makes you say “should have known better.” Tolerating bad failure can be as demotivating as discouraging good failure.

Be aware that the line between good and bad failure is often blurry. Is an avoidable mistake—made in an effort to do something faster than usual—a good failure or a bad failure? That is a judgment call that may require both praise for the extra effort and caution to avoid repeating the mistake. Focus on learning from each past experience and motivating positive future experience. As Rita Mae Brown, a ground-breaking author, said, “Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.”

Brad Barbera, NPDP, is the executive director of PDMA and publisher of Visions, PDMA’s quarterly, digital magazine.

CONTACT BRAD:  