

"Few of our own failures are fatal," economist and Financial Times columnist Tim Harford writes in his new book, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts With Failure*. This may be true, but we certainly don't act like it. When our mistakes stare us in the face, we often find it so upsetting that we miss out on the primary benefit of failing (yes, benefit): the chance to get over our egos and come back with a stronger, smarter approach. According to *Adapt*, "success comes through rapidly fixing our mistakes rather than getting things right first time." To prove his point, Harford cites compelling examples innovation by trial-and-error from visionaries as varied as choreographer Twyla Tharp and US Forces Commander David Petraeus.

I interviewed Harford over email to dig deeper into the counter-intuitive lessons of *Adapt*. What follows is a series of key takeaways on the psychology of failure and adaptation, combining insights from our conversation and the book itself. When it comes to failing, our egos are our own worst enemies. As soon as things start going wrong, our defense mechanisms kick in, tempting us to do what we can to save face. Yet, these very normal reactions — denial, chasing your losses, and hedonic editing — wreak havoc on our ability to adapt. At the crux of *Adapt* lies this conviction: In a complex world, we must use an adaptive, experimental approach to succeed. Harford argues, "the more complex and elusive our problems are, the more effective trial and error becomes." We can't begin to predict whether our "great idea" will actually sink or swim once it's out there. Harford outlines three principles for failing productively: You have to cast a wide net, "practice failing" in a safe space, and be primed to let go of your idea if you've missed the mark.