Safe-fail experiments

A complex system has no repeating relationships between cause and effect, is highly sensitive to small interventions and cannot be determined by outcome based targets; hence when dealing with complex systems there is the need for experimentation. Safe-fail probes are small-scale experiments that approach issues from different angles, in small and safe-to-fail ways, the intent of which is to approach issues in small, contained ways to allow emergent possibilities to become more visible.

The emphasis, then, is not on ensuring success or avoiding failure, but in allowing ideas that are not useful to fail in small, contained and tolerable ways. The ideas that do produce observable benefits can then be adopted and amplified when the complex system has shown the appropriate response to its stimulus. Where systems and the environments in which they exist become increasingly complex, what is known and what can be planned for becomes less certain – introducing and increasing organisational tolerance for failure is more crucial than ever.

Exercise – planning a 'safe-fail' experiment

In you Place Team develop a 'safe-fail' experiment for you systems leadership challenge using the grid provided.

Give and receive co-coaching on your planned experiment in our Home Groups.

1. Individual outlines their current objectives for their safe-fail experiment
    a. What are the hypotheses they want to test?
    b. What data do they want to gather?
    c. What would they really like to try out?

2. Other(s) listens in silence and then take time to reflect before offering one good idea for a developing their safe fail experiment:
    a. What would the form of the experiment be – who would be involved, what would they do/be asked about?
    b. What data would the individual be expected to look for?

3. Individual reflects on the ideas offered.

Plan for a 'safe-fail' experiment

Name of experiment:

Description of experiment	Collective intention/rationale for experiment
Data to be collected/questions to be inquired into (objective and subjective)	**Stakeholders to be involved and support needed**
Indications of success (including own learning)	**Indications of failure**
How will you extend the experiment if successful?	**What will you do if it is unsuccessful?**