

What's a Pilot?

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: General

The term “pilot project” is often used by nonprofit leaders to describe an experiment with something new. “We’re embarking on a pilot project” may refer to an experiment with strategy, target audience to be served, or a newly formed partnership or collaboration. According to Harvard Business School Professor Amy C. Edmondson, “pilot projects are usually designed to succeed rather than to produce intelligent failures—those that generate valuable information.” In her article, “Strategies For Learning From Failure,” featured in the April 2011 edition of the Harvard Business Review, Professor Edmondson offers a list of questions to help determine if an organization has designed “a genuinely useful pilot.” The list of questions includes:

- Is the pilot being tested under typical circumstances (rather than optimal conditions)?
- Is the goal of the pilot to learn as much as possible (rather than to demonstrate the value of the proposed offering)?
- Is the goal of learning well understood by all employees and managers?
- Is it clear that compensation and performance reviews are not based on a successful outcome for the pilot?