ARE YOU LIKE A CAN OF WD-40?

A Question About Innovation Endurance & Your Capacity to Fail

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

WD-40 succeeded on the 40th attempt. Most organizations quit by attempt 7. The question: Are you creating conditions where systematic iteration can happen?

1. Most organizations don't choose their failure capacity it just happens

Innovation initiatives typically get 3-7 attempts before budget reallocation or team reassignment. This rarely reflects strategy it emerges from quarterly pressure and org charts.

2. Not all 'attempts' are equal

Technical iteration (testing formulas) differs fundamentally from market validation (testing if customers want something). WD-40 had clear feedback. Most corporate innovation doesn't.

3. Persistence without learning is expensive stubbornness

Being on attempt 23 isn't always noble. The question isn't just 'how many attempts?' but 'what are we learning per attempt?'

4. Create different tracks for different innovation types

Continuous improvement (3-7 attempts, quarterly evaluation) vs. transformational innovation (15-25 attempts, annual evaluation). Most organizations use the same process for both.

Strange question to ask any employee, executive, or board member but it's exactly my first question when clients ask me about growth and innovation at either my first meeting or during a conference speaking engagement, I bring a small WD-40 can, usually under 3oz so I can get by TSA without checking my luggage as a prop.

I know what you're thinking: what does that have to do with either personal, team, division, or company growth?

Everything.
But first, if you're not familiar with WD-40, let me refresh your memory.

The WD-40 Story: What It Actually Teaches

In 1953, chemist Norm Larsen failed 39 times before creating WD-40 ("Water Displacement, 40th formula") to prevent missile corrosion. Today, the product has over 2,000 documented uses.

But here's what makes this relevant: Larsen had guaranteed salary, clear technical criteria, immediate feedback, and an organization that resourced scientific iteration. He wasn't chasing a bad idea—he was systematically iterating toward a known goal. He had a higher capacity for failure!

This distinction matters.

The Real Question

WHAT IS YOUR CAPACITY TO FAIL? DOES YOUR ORGANIZATIN, TEAM OR YOU PERSOANLLY HAVE THE SPACE TO FAIL AND IF SO, HOW MANY TIMES?

But: Does your organization create conditions where systematic iteration can happen?

Most organizations SAY they want innovation, but their structures, timelines, and evaluation criteria make sustained experimentation nearly impossible.

Two Types of Innovation Attempts

Type 1: Technical Iteration	Type 2: Market Exploration
• Clear criteria • Immediate feedback • Low cost/attempt • Known outcome **Examples:** Dyson's 5,126 vacuum prototypes or Post-it Notes (12 years from invention to market)	• Ambiguous feedback • Delayed signals • High cost/attempt • Undefined outcome **Examples:** SaaS product pivots, **PayPal:** Started as Confinity (cryptography for handhelds), pivoted to payments or **Slack:** Started as a gaming company (Glitch), pivoted to internal communication tool

Type 1 often requires many attempts. Type 2 requires learning whether you're on the right track, then deciding to persist or pivot.

A Framework for Innovation Endurance

1. Make Attempt Capacity Strategic

Don't let it default to 3-7 attempts. Ask: For this innovation type, how many attempts is reasonable? What signals tell us we're learning vs. burning money? When do we decide to double down or move on?

2. Separate Innovation Types

Continuous Improvement: 3-7 attempts, quarterly evaluation

Transformational: 15-25 attempts, annual evaluation

Most organizations use identical processes for both.

3. Protect 2-5 Strategic Bets

Not everything gets long runway. Pick a few initiatives that could transform your business and give them: longer evaluation cycles, learning metrics (not just revenue), protection from quarterly scrutiny, and clear executive sponsorship.

4. Define Keep-Going vs. Stop Signals

Keep going if: Learning, getting closer, seeing validation

Stop if: No new insights, same failures repeating, market says no

When Persistence Becomes Dangerous

This framework fails when it:

• Enables sunk cost fallacy (attempting 23 with zero learning)

• Ignores market signals (customers repeatedly saying no)

• Romanticizes suffering (attempt 18 as badge of honor vs. reality check)

• Wastes capital (every dollar on attempt 25 isn't going elsewhere)

The question isn't just 'how many attempts?' but 'what are we learning per attempt?'

Five Questions for Your Organization

1. How many current initiatives are on attempt 1-5 vs. attempt 15+? If everything is early stage, are you creating space for anything to mature?

2. When you last killed an initiative, was it strategic (based on learning) or accidental (ran out of budget/attention)?

3. Do you use different evaluation processes for continuous improvement vs. transformational innovation?

4. What would protecting 2-3 strategic initiatives with longer timelines look like?

5. At the personal level: What have you quit after 2-3 attempts that might have worked at attempt 10?

THE BOTTOM LINE

I keep a can of WD-40 on my desk not because every innovation needs 40 attempts, but because it asks: Are we creating conditions where systematic iteration CAN happen?

Most organizations err on the side of too little persistence not because they're wrong to kill ideas, but because they never consciously DECIDED their approach to attempt capacity. It just emerged from budget cycles and quarterly pressure.

Have one conversation: "For our most important initiatives, how many attempts are we willing to fund before making a real decision?" Write down a number. Then ask: Is that strategic, or did it just happen?

What's your number? And do you know why?

About the Author

Joe Batista is a strategic advisor focused on helping executives reframe growth challenges and identify breakthrough opportunities. With decades of experience creating value for Fortune 500 companies and emerging ventures, Joe specializes in connecting strategic dots others miss.

His approach combines rigorous analysis with pattern recognition across industries, enabling clients to see familiar problems through entirely new frameworks.

What if the biggest obstacle to your growth isn't the competition—but the way you think?

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What opportunities are you missing because you're not asking the right questions?