

A person in a dark hoodie stands with their back to the camera on a dark floor, looking towards a stage in a large, dimly lit arena. The stage is illuminated by several bright spotlights from above, creating a dramatic effect. The arena's seating is visible in the background, mostly empty. The title 'How to FAIL' is centered over the image, with 'How to' in a white script font and 'FAIL' in large, bold, orange block letters.

How to FAIL

And other lessons from a *life* in the events
and live experience industry

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Foreword :

I want to tell you about the arm.

It was a Wednesday afternoon. I was driving to a venue recce when my left arm went numb. Not painful. Numb. The tingling that begins at the shoulder and moves down to the fingertips, the kind of sensation the body produces when it is trying to send a message the brain has spent years refusing to read. I pulled over. I sat on the side of the road with the engine running and my left arm hanging at my side, and I did not call a doctor. I called my operations manager. I said I might be late. I asked if she could start without me. She said yes. I waited for the numbness to pass, drove to the venue, walked the space, smiled at the venue manager, took the measurements, drove to the office, sat at my desk, answered emails, and did not tell a single person what had happened on the side of the road.

I did not tell anyone because telling someone would have made it real. And real would have required stopping. And I did not know, at that point in my life, how to stop. Twenty-something years of events, and nobody in this industry had ever taught me to stop. I had been taught the opposite. I had been taught by the schedule and the client and the culture of the profession itself that stopping was the one thing a person in this work did not do.

This book begins there. On the side of a road. With a numb arm and a phone call to the wrong person.

It does not begin at a podium. It does not begin in a conference room with a framework and a case study and the composed authority of someone who has figured it all out. I have stood at enough podiums. I know what the podium version of this story sounds like. The podium version has a lesson at the end. The lesson arrives cleanly, earned, a thing the speaker has survived and therefore owns. The audience nods. The session ends. Everyone goes to lunch.

Foreword :

This was supposed to be a different book. I had the title. I had the structure. I had nearly thirty years of events in my body, more than two thousand occasions on which something had been built from nothing and had become, if everything went right, an experience that the people inside it would carry somewhere personal and keep. I had opinions. I had frameworks. I had the particular confidence of a person who has been doing something long enough to believe they understand it.

The book I intended to write was a success manual. How to design experiences that land. How to build teams that hold. How to manage a crisis, a client, a budget, a baraat on cobblestones. The accumulated wisdom of a career that had started before event management was a recognised profession in this country, before there were degrees in it or associations for it or conferences where people gave talks about it, back when it was just a thing that certain stubborn, slightly unhinged people did because they could not imagine doing anything else.

I sat down to write that book. I wrote the first chapter. Then I stopped.

Not because the writing was bad. Because it was dishonest. Not false, exactly. The frameworks were real. The lessons were earned. But the voice was wrong. It was the voice of someone at the lectern, looking out over a room full of people who had come to learn, delivering material with the authority of someone who had always known it. And that person, that composed person at the lectern, is not who built the two thousand events. That person arrived later. That person is, if I am being precise, a character I have been performing for years in conference rooms and classrooms while the real education, the one that actually happened, sat in a different register entirely.

The real education happened in the failures. Not the dramatic ones. Not the generator that died at eight-forty-seven PM or the keynote speaker whose flight diverted to the wrong city or the horse that refused the cobblestones. Those failures are good stories, and good stories are in this book because good stories are the only honest container for the things this profession actually teaches. But the failures I mean are quieter. The ones that did not announce themselves as failures at the time. The ones that looked, from the outside, exactly like success.

Foreword :

The pitch that cost three weeks of real work, twenty-two days, one hundred and sixty-two slides, a Tuesday dinner cancelled, a midnight that became 2 AM, and lost to a chilled towel and a handwritten card. The invoice unpaid at thirty days and sixty and ninety, the specific sensation of composing the third reminder in language so careful it had stopped resembling a request for money and started resembling a plea dressed as professionalism. The event that ran perfectly and produced nothing, the room full of people who left exactly as they arrived, unchanged, unoffended, unaffected. The team member whose quiet distress I did not see because I was looking at the schedule instead of the person. The six employees who were six in 2014 and six in 2018 and six in 2023 because I had confused a working company with a growing one and spent years treating the confusion as stability.

The company I started in 1996 with the conviction of someone who had more belief than capital, which is the standard ratio for first-generation entrepreneurs and which is either the right way to begin or the only way to begin, depending on where you are standing. I stood in that beginning for a very long time. I ran the company, I built the shows, I solved the crises, I earned the clients. What I did not do, for longer than I want to say, was have the conversation about what the company needed to become. That conversation was always almost happening. The show would be over first. The crisis would be managed first. The Monday after that Monday had its own demands. The conversation never happened. And the company became the shape of that silence, which is a thing I understand completely now and understood too late to change before I had to let it go.

I am telling you this because this book is about the things we do not say.

Foreword :

This industry has a specific, practised, entirely understandable relationship with its own failures. We do not talk about them. Not the real ones.

- We talk about the generator that died at eight-forty-seven and how we solved it in twelve minutes, because that story ends with our competence intact.

- We do not talk about the client we lost not to a competitor but to our own inability to hear what they were actually asking for.

-We do not talk about the team that fractured under pressure because we hired for skill and forgot about temperament, which is the same mistake made in slightly different clothing every time.

- We do not talk about the year our account ran at a deficit because we had spent three months pitching for free and winning the work and absorbing the cost and calling the absorption professional commitment.

-We do not talk about the arm going numb on the side of a road and calling the operations manager instead of the doctor.

We perform competence instead.

We post the after-photograph on Social Media. We give the talk at the conference about what we learned, which is always framed as learning and never as the specific, embarrassing, costly, occasionally body-level moment in which the learning occurred. We have built an entire professional culture on the presentation of the lesson rather than the lived texture of the education, and the cost of that culture is borne privately, in the second drawer with the brown folder and the calcified Hajmola, at three AM sitting on the edge of a bed staring at a wall with a phone in your hand and the screen dark.

I know what 3 A.M. on the edge of a bed feels like. I know it in my body. I know the specific quality of that silence, the way it is not restful, not peaceful, not the silence of someone at ease with what they have built. It is the silence of a person who has run so hard for so long that they have lost track of why they started running and are afraid that if they stop, the question will be waiting.

Foreword :

I also know something else about this industry that I want to say before you go any further into this book, because it is the thing the 3 AM silence does not tell you and the conference panels do not say and the success stories omit entirely.

We stay because there are moments in this work that exist nowhere else.

The moment the lights come up and the room changes. The specific, irreplaceable, completely private satisfaction of standing in a space you built from a blank floor and a brief and watching it become something that ten thousand people will carry somewhere personal and keep.

The 10 PM phone call from a client who needs something only you can solve, and the specific electric pleasure of being the person who can solve it, which is not ego, or not only ego, it is the deep and genuine recognition that you have built a capability over years that matters and is real and is yours. The baraat horse and the cobblestones and the problem that has never been in any textbook and the four seconds before you find the answer, which are the four seconds that tell you whether you are in the right profession.

You are. We are. That is not the question.

The question is what we do with the rest of it. The numb arm. The six employees who stayed six. The invoice at ninety days. The team member we did not see. The brown folder in the second drawer. The conversation that never happened. The person in this industry who loved this work completely, gave it everything, and for whom the everything was not returned, whose body sent its warnings and whose schedule absorbed them and whose story ended before anyone thought to ask how they were doing.

I have known people like that. I have worked beside them. I have lost one. That loss is in this book the way shadows are in a room, present without being named, shaping what the light falls on.

Foreword :

This book is the conversation I wish someone had started with me earlier. Not the lecture. Not the framework. The actual conversation, the one that happens between people who have been in the same rooms and made the same mistakes and are willing, finally, to say so. The one where nobody is performing competence. The one where the room is quiet enough to hear what the work has actually cost and what it has actually given and whether those two things, held together, add up to something worth protecting.

I have been teaching for two decades. I have sat with students talking about conviction to capital, the same first-ring energy, But that is incomplete. I want to give them what nobody gave me, which is the honest account of what the first ring energy does not cover. Not discouragement. Not the jaded wisdom of someone who has seen too much.

But, The prior knowledge that failure is the curriculum and the curriculum is survivable and the people who built the events worth remembering were not the people who failed less. They were the people who failed more honestly.

The chapters ahead are composites. The names have been changed. Some details have been shifted or compressed to protect the people and clients involved, because this book is not about blame. It is about recognition. The recognition that says:

I have been here too.

I have stood in this room.

I have made this call.

I have sat on this edge at 3 AM.

And I went back.

Foreword :

Not because the going back was easy. but because the work asked for it.

Because a room full of people waiting to feel something is a reason to get off the side of the road and drive to the venue.

Because the thing that made the arm go numb is the same thing that makes the lights coming up in a full room feel like the only place in the world worth being.

Because we are in a contradiction and the contradiction is not a problem to be solved. It is the profession.

These are the notes from inside it.

You are me, and I am you... and I hope this book finds YOU

JR

Mumbai, 2025