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SmartLessons
real experiences, real development

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How to Discuss Failure—and Not Get Fired! Lessons from a 2011 Human Development Forum Session

Any organization can be good at discussing its successes and good practices. But can it be a truly effective agent for learning and change if success is all it discusses? Doesn't continual learning require being open about mistakes— having the courage to talk about them so they can be corrected and not repeated? An organization can be more effective if its staff takes individual responsibility for creating a culture in which risk taking is not only tolerated but also encouraged, and failure is openly discussed. Some experts ascribe about 80 percent of the barriers to an organization's success to issues associated with organizational culture—the way it does business, including how it learns from its mistakes and failures (See Figure 1). Organizations that openly discuss mistakes and shortcomings tend to get better, become more innovative, and have greater impact. The 2011 Human Development Forum featured a FAILFaire[1]-type session, "How Learning from Failure Can Make Project Success More Likely." This SmartLesson grew out of staff requests for follow-up information from that session.

Background

> *"Failure is a detour, not a dead-end street"*
> Zig Ziglar

The FAILFaire concept was invented by [MobileActive](#),[2] a nongovernmental organization (NGO) created to "connect people, organizations, and resources using mobile technology for social change." MobileActive has been covering ICT (information and communication technology) and mobiles for development for almost six years and has seen its share of failures. According to its blog, "For every great project that changes how a community benefits from technology to improve the lives of its people, there seem to be twice as many projects that fail, and end up wasting time, money, and maybe worst, goodwill." This is why MobileActive published its Guide to Failure, saying with a great deal of humor: "If you follow each of the headlines, you are sure to fail." Below are the headlines:

- Don't Clearly State the Project Objectives
- Don't Plan Ahead
- Go It Alone
- Don't Adjust/Don't Compromise
- Ignore the Community
- Don't Scale Your Rollout
- Ignore Critics
- Burn Your Budget
- Burn Bridges
- Don't Plan for the End

[1] According to "FAILFaire: Learning from #FAILs in ICT and Mobiles for Development," a Web site found at http://fail-faire.org/about/, the program takes a close look at what didn't work and why projects failed. "We believe that only if we understand what DOESN'T WORK in this field and stop pushing our failures under the rug, can we collectively learn and get better, more effective, and have impact as we go forward."

[2] MobileActive works with grassroots activists, NGO staff, intermediary organizations, content and service providers, and organizations that fund mobile technology projects "to create the resources NGOs need to effectively use mobile phones in their work: locally relevant content and services, support and learning opportunities, and networks that help MobileActives connect to each other." See http://www.mobileactive.org/about.

MobileActive organized its first FAILFaire event in New York in 2010. Its second FAILFaire session, in July 2010, was hosted by the World Bank Institute's Innovation Practice, and it spotlighted Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D). The event featured presentations by practitioners who shared 10-minute presentations of ICT4D-related projects that failed, did not meet the development objectives, or did not make it past the pilot stage.

> "Behind the [FAILFaire] events is a Manhattan-based non-profit group, MobileActive, a network of people and organizations trying to improve the lives of the poor through technology. Its members hope light-hearted examinations of failures will turn into learning experiences—and prevent others from making the same mistakes."
> The New York Times

The 2011 Human Development Forum Session

The overall focus of the 2011 HD Forum was on increasing human and social capacities and productivity. With that in mind, and inspired by the FAILFaire successes, the ICT/education team in the Bank's education sector anchor unit organized its session on "How Learning from Failure Can Make Project Success More Likely." The team wanted to include "failures" from various projects (health, social protection, education, gender) with the objective of helping task teams learn from the experiences and mistakes of their colleagues. The hope was that open discussions of failures would provide a great learning experience, lessening the likelihood that others would make the same mistakes, and increasing the likelihood that future projects would be more successful. More generally, the team hoped that this session would contribute in a small way to fostering an environment of increasing openness and knowledge sharing among staff about lessons and experiences that often get "swept under the rug."

A message went out informally to some task team members to ask whether they know about "failed" projects. At first, there was a lot of sensitivity about the word "failure," and it made many people nervous. But as people began to understand that there is a safe environment where they can discuss their "failed" projects, the excitement started growing and more and more brave volunteers began joining. A few days before the session, the group of presenters included 10 people, not counting managers and staff who made introductory remarks. More than 100 Bank staff attended the session.

> "Failure is not falling down but refusing to get up"
> Chinese Proverb

Lessons Learned

1) Create a safe space.

Creating a safe space for presenters and the audience was one of the necessary conditions for a session to take place. Initially, some presenters felt that calling a project a failure

"puts others on the spot." Some also felt that if the information on failure is picked up outside the walls of the Bank, it can do a lot of harm, especially if taken out of context. So to encourage openness and the sharing of information, the team invoked the world-famous Chatham House Rule, which says that "participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed."

The session adopted the following rules:

- The session is completely "off the record": no filming or live casting the proceedings, no recording, no tweeting, and no blogging.

- PowerPoint presentations will not be distributed, either before or after the session, and will not be circulated or posted on the Intranet.

- Presenters are introduced by their first names and the first letter of the last name (Tim K., John E.), and the cover slide has only the presenter's first name on it.

- The name of the country can be changed, if needed, to avoid unnecessary sensitivity.

- People may approach presenters directly if they are interested in more information.

2) Obtain the manager's approval.

It is important to find out whether discussing failure is within your manager's comfort zone and, if so, to get his or her approval. The team was lucky to have obtained senior management's approval for this session to take place. But there were indications of sensitivity to the idea of discussing failure. On the main Forum agenda, for example, the title of an event changed several times—and the word "failure" disappeared from it several times. A chief economist and practice manager opened an event, a sector manager presented, a director attended the session. A number of presenters cleared their presentations with their managers before an event. To avoid additional reputational risk, the presentations were made on behalf of an individual and not the organization; presenters talked about projects they personally were involved in or those they were responsible for. Some presentations were made by the teams.

> "There are no failures – just experiences and your reaction to them"
> Tom Krause

3) Engage the audience.

To enhance the learning experience, the audience has to be engaged in the process—especially when there is no time allotted for questions and answers. We did not allow time for Q&A for two reasons: One was simply to save time—we had only an hour and a half for 10 presenters. The other was to avoid a lengthy discussion with audience participants, for

fear that they might name names or assign blame in their questions. We asked for short "ignite style" presentations. To compensate for the lack of a Q&A session, we introduced voting by interactive-response devices, commonly known as "clickers," and asked the audience questions. The voting took place between presentations. Below are some examples of the questions:

- Which lesson from this project example resonated with you the most?

- Which "failure" or mistake identified here have you experienced in one of your projects?

- What surprised you most in this project example?

- Were these "failures" specific to the context of this sector or country, or are they likely to be found more widely?

Finally, we asked the audience to vote for the "finest failure." General voting and the recognition of a winner took place at the end of the session. We also included inspirational "failure" quotes and distributed handouts of additional resources, such as a failure checklist based on the presentation, "Policy Failures: Why things go wrong" by Billy Hamilton and Jody Kusek.

4) Manage time—and mean it!

We created templates of the following five slides and asked the presenters to prepare them in PowerPoint format:

> *"Failure is nature's plan to prepare you for great responsibilites"*
>
> Napoleon Hill

Slide 1: Cover slide, the name of the presentation (for example, "Everything you always wanted to know about 'failed' projects but were afraid to ask").

Slide 2: Details of the project—what, where, when.

Slide 3: What you were trying to do, what the objectives were.

Slide 4: What "failed," why it went wrong.

Slide 5: What you would do differently next time, what takeaway message you would like to give to the audience.

We gave each presenter seven minutes to share lessons about her or his project, and we programmed the slides to change every 60 seconds. (This did not work very well, because most people needed either less or more time to cover the slide content.) A gong sounded at the end of seven minutes. Unfortunately, some presenters went well over the time limit, even though the gong sounded more than once. We also used an iPad with a stopwatch visible to all presenters.

5) Make it a learning event.

The projects discussed at the session were not total failures. Some of them suffered from project aspects that were underestimated, some from incorrect decisions, and some from lack of sustainability. Some projects took off only after they were redesigned. Others showed a lack of results. One way or another, each of them had a number of lessons that a person responsible was asked to share. One of the presenters said, "I decided to make a presentation to show that a project considered a failure was actually not a failure at all."

As one presentation followed another, it became more and more apparent that there is a lot of similarity in the problems that the projects faced.

After the session, with many people asking for presentations, we suggested that they approach the presenters individually for more information. Some people wrote to us after the session, asking for copies of presentations. In some cases, with agreement from the presenter, we released the name and contact information to the interested staff for further discussion. Most of the presenters, though, were not in favor of the idea. To keep our promise to the presenters on the one hand and still make the substance of the lessons available, we reviewed the content of the "takeaway messages" slides (Slide No. 5) from all 10 presentations, and extracted six pieces of advice:

- Don't make things too complex or too ambitious.

- Make a sound risk/challenge/political economy analysis.

- Create an appropriate institutional setting in the client country.

- Ensure ownership/capacity of local implementers/ users.

- Come with good specialists and equipment (notably when technology matters).

- Build in "protecting" and good management mechanisms.

Conclusion

> *"Failure is not a single cataclysmic event. You don't fail overnight. Instead, failure is a few errors in judgment repeated everyday"*
>
> Chinese Proverb

When an organization tries to become a learning organization and tries to innovate, one possible outcome is a failure, a mistake, or simply a lack of good results. Is your organization or unit constantly learning from good and "bad" practices? Or, are staff making the same mistakes and reinventing the wheel? If the latter is true, your organization may need to change its culture. It's the only way an organization can progress, innovate, and learn. The

Should we program another, Bankwide FAILFaire event for later this year?

1. Yes, the concept/format works

2. Yes, but change the format

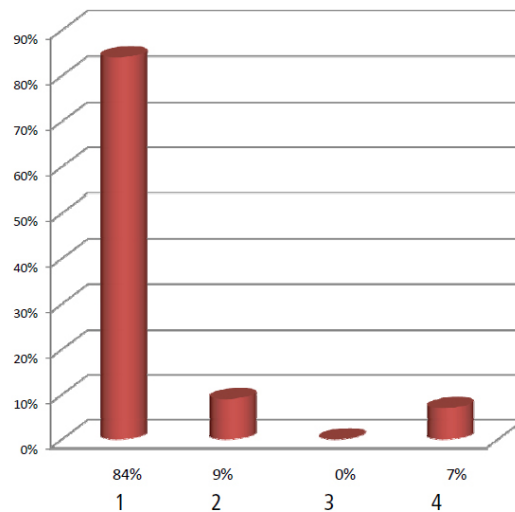3. No, but relevant or interesting for the Bank

4. No opinion

Figure 1: Polling Results for Having Another FAILFaire Event

Dutch Institute of Brilliant Failures has instituted a new Transparency Award in the Development Aid Sector, explaining, "Time and time again history has shown us that our most valuable experiences are more likely to come from mistakes than from successes. We learn from our failures, and our failures are a source of inspiration for others. In this respect failure is not only an option but failure is also necessary." How did we measure our own success? At the end of the 2011 Forum session, we asked the audience whether the Bank should program another event of this type. Figure 1 shows the results.