

2014 FAILURE REPORT

MONITORING, EVALUATING, AND ADAPTING TO FAILURE



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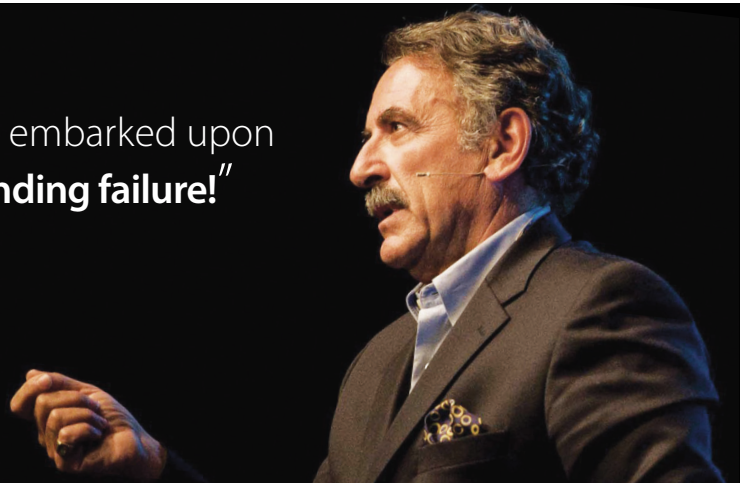
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INTRODUCTION: FAILURE AS MEDICINE

By Dr. Ernesto Sirolli, Sustainable Development expert,
founder of the Enterprise Facilitation approach

“Every well-meaning project we embarked upon
returned the same result – **resounding failure!**”

DR. ERNESTO SIROLLI



My life, both personally and professionally, has been shaped by my experiences as a young man in Africa. I've told this story many times before, notably in my book, *Ripples From the Zambezi*, but I tell it here again because I believe it's important. For seven years, I worked for an Italian NGO in Zambia, Kenya, Algerian, Somalia, and the Ivory Coast. My faith in the change we were driving was gradually eroded as every well-meaning project we embarked upon returned the same result – resounding failure!

The first project I was a part of, an agricultural initiative in southern Zambia, was the most critical experience in the development of my current paradigm. We arrived off the coast of the Zambezi River with Italian seeds, the very best of intentions, and a comprehensive plan to feed the poor Zambian people.

Our first failure, of many, was ignoring the complete and total lack of interest the local people had in agriculture. We had to pay them to come work and, occasionally, they would

show up. Rather than question the locals on their lack of enthusiasm, we simply said, “Thank God we're here!”

The season progressed, and our crops were growing beautifully. The valley was fertile and the harvest promised unprecedented bounty. You can only imagine our shock and distress when, just before the harvest as the tomatoes were beginning to ripen, some two hundred hippos came out of the water during the night, ate every bit of food, and returned to the Zambezi.

We looked at the Zambians standing by, speechless for a moment, then finally cried, “My God, the hippos!”

“Yes,” came the reply, “that's why we have no agriculture here.”

What a failure! We had entered the community so certain of what the Zambians needed, so blinded by our patronizing arrogance, that we had neglected even the most superficial of consultations with the local people.

However, after seeing the work that other NGOs were doing in the sector I became quite proud of our work in Zambia, for at the very least we had fed the hippos. Contrary to the commercials we see on the television, the development sector is far from perfect. In fact, it can be downright toxic if benevolent westerners, full of pomp and purpose, are left to their own meddling devices.

The development sector is plagued by NGO's chronic unwillingness to own up to their mistakes for the (legitimate) fear that donors will stop supporting them. As a result, failures are repeated, poor practices are pervasive and ultimately it is the local, passionate people on the ground – those with excellent ideas, who know their community better than any westerner – that suffer.

Yes, my first experience in Zambia was a waste of resources. It was humiliating. Shameful. A very bitter pill for a young, motivated person to swallow, and naturally I was distraught. But failure can be the unpleasant medicine necessary to push us, albeit forcefully and more often than not, uncomfortably, in the right direction.

My failure illustrated, with the particular clarity that failure affords, what was wrong with the current approach to development, and by extension the direction that I should take and the values that I should adopt.

As a result of my humbling experience, I decided to flip the development dynamic – rather than applying my solutions to others' problems, I became a servant to the local passion of capable, dedicated entrepreneurs. I entered into communities with no ideas, no agenda, and simply connected people to the resources they needed to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations. However, these businesses certainly didn't succeed overnight – a culture of entrepreneurship cannot exist without allowing, forgiving and even embracing 'mistakes', so failure was an inherent part of their growth. This new 'enterprise facilitation' approach was wildly effective – it's currently being practiced in over 300 communities and is responsible for 40,000 businesses world-wide. This radical change in direction that led to so much good wouldn't have been possible had I ignored the failure, and therefore ignored the lesson, from my time in Zambia.

This is why I applaud the small-but-mighty Engineers Without Borders Canada for openly publishing stories of their failure for the world to see. In his introduction to the 2012 Failure Report, co-founder George Roter stated that failure makes us stop and reconsider, "forcing [us] to ask whether we succeeded or not, and to make changes if the answer is 'not.'"

This report is certainly not an attempt to sensationalize or glamourize failure – as in my personal experience, there is nothing sensational or glamorous about it! Rather, this is a collection of testimonies by people that are brave enough to announce to the world that they were going about it wrong. This is a challenging thing to do, but they do it because they believe in the power of opening up these difficult conversations. The stories in this report are about failure. But they are not about defeat. They are about experiences that have shaped these individuals and, through extension, the organization of which they're a part.

By challenging their work, they are challenging chronic and pervasive problems in the international development sector. They are making themselves vulnerable because they recognize that in sharing their experiences they can educate others about the realities of development on the ground. And finally, they realize that by admitting their failures – particularly those of a more personal nature – they are making a sincere and valiant effort to learn from their own mistakes. They have the foresight to realize that this failure, painful as it may be, can be a wonderful gift if they choose to take their hard earned lesson and act on it in a meaningful way.

These stories are not the endings. They are starting points; beginnings of new directions. These authors had the courage to speak out and admit to others and – perhaps most importantly – to themselves, that they were wrong.

To those reading, I implore you: don't restrict your learnings to this document. Use these stories as a learning tool, certainly, but also as a spring board. I want you to ask yourself, honestly and critically, in what ways have you failed? What are those failures telling you, and what needs to change as a result? Yes, it is difficult. But, as the stories in this report clearly attest, it is more than possible.

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

By Matthieu Bister, Pivot Fellowship Co-Lead

The Pivot Fellowship is an eight-month social intrapreneurship training program designed to support and activate Canadian professionals to be changemakers in their workplace. The program welcomes other innovators as well, through some of its activities. At the time of writing, we have just run our second Pivot Bootcamp as part of the program pilot, which re-sparked a passion for corporate social innovation for 15 participants, and I am proud to call it a success! We achieved and surpassed our goal for the pilot program. Not only did we learn; I truly believe that it will carry an impact far beyond the eight months of the initiative's first cohort. Our failures are why we had to learn things the hard way.

Failures

The first challenge we faced was the number of applications for the first cohort – it was dramatically lower than what we expected. Our goal was to have 50 applicants from which we would select eight to twelve Fellows, 80% of which we anticipated would be Engineers Without Borders Canada members (EWBers).

Instead, we started off with only three people who had almost never been involved with EWB before. Had they not been as inspiring as they are, we would not have started the cohort at all.

Our program-level failure was that we designed the Fellowship in response to a need we had identified through our professional members, but we did not engage them in the design of the Fellowship itself. This meant that we created and promoted a product that was not accessible to EWB's most valuable asset: its members.

The other root failure is both personal and organizational.

On the personal level, I didn't have the courage to acknowledge I wasn't ready to live up to our really ambitious initial targets.

After our first challenge, I didn't deliver on all the activities we had designed and promised to EWBers out of guilt, and because I lacked the personal resilience to be a rapidly pivoting entrepreneur myself. This created a reinforcing loop of guilt and failures, preventing me from reaching out for help.

It also seemed to me that our oversized ambition was reinforced organizationally. I thought I was expected to be able to coordinate and execute on the design, promotion and delivery of the pilot program by myself. This perception was based on years of seeing other initiatives' founders and leaders building things with their heart and sweat, and it created the pressure that I should be able to do the same by myself. Again, this prevented me from fully leveraging the help available around me.

Learning

I adapted my mental model to accept that a social entrepreneur, as much as a social intrapreneur, is never alone. One should never start any social innovation thinking one has to shoulder all the weight and be responsible to coordinate everything. This recognition is allowing me to let go of most of the accumulated guilt, and be excited about the coming three years as we extend our capacity to deliver on our ambitions.

The organizational learning is more subtle. I personally believe that we do have to paint an ambitious picture of what a System Change Leader is, to inspire ourselves to always reach for excellence. While this organizational practice led me to feel that I couldn't say "No" even though I felt I was not ready for it, I think that the "hard way to learn" might be necessary damage that we have to come to terms with whenever we innovate in complexity. Therefore, what I learned organizationally is simply that we should always strive to minimize those damages.

WEARING TOO MANY HATS

By Meaghan Langille, Advocacy Distributed Team Lead

When it came time to recruit, onboard, and build this year's Advocacy Distributed Team, we had our sights on certain skills and assets that would make our big dreams become reality in the coming year and beyond. We were planning a series of events across Canada, the Next Step Summits, which would feature ideas, networking opportunities, and discussion about how we can advance Canadian foreign policy and global development issues by accelerating active citizenship.

A total of five events would be held coast-to-coast to bring together local civic leaders, young professionals, students, and NGO practitioners, and we knew one of the advocacy team's strongest assets in making the Summits a reality would be the talented and dedicated advocacy representatives (reps) at Chapters and City Networks across the country.

With this in mind, we set out to recruit a Distributed Team with strong coaching and mentorship capabilities so they could continue to build the knowledge, skills, and confidence of these reps to make the Summits successful. In planning for the year, we placed coaching and investing in reps as core components of our team's operations.

The tricky part was translating that plan into action. More specifically, as we organized the Summits, two key failures prevented us from reaching our potential impact.

Failure 1: Putting the Cart Before the Horse

Despite our intentions, we naturally put the Summits themselves before the priority of building the key competencies required to organize and coordinate such events. Initially, we envisioned reps and Distributed Team members working together to build our collective community event organizing skills – in practice, National Office staff and the Distributed Team took on more direct

planning and coordination than we planned. This approach led us to a second failure.

Failure 2: Wearing Too Many Hats

Because we took on more of the responsibility for the Summits than we intended, and failed to prioritize building the key competencies in our reps, we placed ourselves in a position where we were juggling too many priorities – what I like to call “wearing too many hats.”

Balancing too many hats means some things are bound to topple, and for our team that meant the coaching and mentorship of the advocacy community was being placed on the back-burner. In addition, we were operating in a way that placed us on a rapid path to burn out.

We knew we had reached a point of reflection: we needed to look at our progress as a team, our collective energy, and where we should be prioritizing our efforts. When we look exclusively at the outcomes of this year and how we communicate as a team, we are happy. However, we acknowledge that the processes we take to reach our goals need to be re-oriented to place coaching, skill building, and investing in the advocacy community at the forefront of our team's focus. In addition, we need to operate in a way that promotes health and wellbeing within the team.

In recognizing these failures, we have come together as a team to establish new practices that give team members the space they need for self-care, while prioritizing time for coaching advocacy reps and providing the resources they need to reach their full potential. We look forward to building on these learnings to ensure the year to come is truly our best one yet.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

By Miriam Hird-Younger, AgEx Venture Lead

One of EWB's core values is *Investing in People*, and I believe it is one of the things that we do best. I, myself, have grown tremendously throughout my time with EWB, and in regards to our partners, investing in the capacity and skills of change agents with whom we work has been crucial to our success. That said, systemic change includes – but also goes beyond – individual capacity and development. Systemic change happens when shifts fundamentally change the way a system works. If change is solely dependent on an individual, it's probably not systemic.

The AgEx Venture learned this lesson a year after the Agribusiness and Entrepreneurship (A&E) Project (a hands-on course in which students develop and launch their own agribusiness) became a lecturer-driven part of the curriculum without our ongoing support. In this process, there was a lot of emphasis placed on building the capacity of a group of lecturers, one from each institution, that were passionate about agribusiness and entrepreneurship. The sustainability of our program was challenged in 2013, however, when one of our key lecturers was offered the opportunity to pursue an MA in Agribusiness in the US, and no one else at the college had the training to teach the project. College administration was strongly in favour of the program and did not want to see the program discontinued, so in the end the principal of this college coordinated with another to have their A&E lecturer come to teach. We quickly learned from this oversight and encouraged each principal and A&E Fellow to begin building the capacity of at least one additional lecturer at each institution.

In this case, AgEx had supported a strong foundation of informal and formal systems to support the project. The institutions valued A&E to the point of finding a solution to the problem that arose. However, the problem could have been entirely prevented if we had invested in the capacity of more than one individual, and encouraged inter-lecturer mentorship within each institution. We believe this lesson is particularly applicable to those working in systems like Ghana's public sector, where transfers and leaves for further studies are commonplace and mean that champion change agents can leave the system without much notice.

In our Ventures, it is easy to work with the passionate, excited and quick-to-put-their-hand-up change agents. But we cannot stop there. We cannot forget that a change is not systemic or sustainable if it rests in just one individual. There needs to be systems and structures around them to ensure that a change becomes part of the institution and culture – that it becomes formally and informally a systemic change. Systemic changes must be institutionalized, rather than individualized.



MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

By Faiza Tamaiko and Jon Haley, Head of Tamaiko
Enterprise and BDSA Venture Co-Lead

Delivering consultancy and business development services to dynamic, rapidly-evolving small businesses in West Africa requires a degree of adaptability and flexibility far above traditional project-based development work. This creates a tension with the equally important requirements to maintain rigour, accountability, and attribution of results. By focusing too strongly on achieving project objectives, Business Development Services Africa (BDSA) failed to strike an appropriate balance in this tension, and nearly missed the opportunity to make a truly long-term impact on the growth of Taimako Enterprises.

BDSA is a venture of EWB Canada's Small and Growing Business Portfolio, working as technical and business consultants to growth-stage agricultural businesses in Ghana and Zambia. Taimako Enterprises Ltd. (now RAINCorp) is a second-generation family business located in Tamale, Ghana. They specialize in the production of timber and food crop tree seedlings and are one of the largest suppliers of seedlings in Northern Ghana.

BDSA and Taimako formed a partnership in 2013 with the mutual goal of improving Taimako's business practices, financial management, and organizational structure. At the time, these high level objectives were chosen to achieve what both organizations believed was required for Taimako to take the next step as a rapidly growing business. Over the next 13 months, the priorities, business environment, and many other factors rapidly evolved, while the stated objectives and metrics for the project's success did not keep pace.

At the end of the contract, the direct outcomes of the stated deliverables proved to be far less important than the knock-

on, indirect effects borne out of the engagement itself. For example, through the process of working to formalize Taimako's business systems, BDSA sought to improve the transparency of the company. This had the indirect and unanticipated impact of stimulating a change within the company's leadership structure, creating the opportunity for the tree seedling business to rebrand and achieve more flexibility and independence. Focusing on the mechanics of the business and producing the hard, technical deliverables of the project – such as drafting policies and establishing accounting systems – actually delayed progress towards the larger, more fundamental shift occurring at the company. The result was a success in absolute terms, but a failure in the relative terms of completing deliverables and proving attribution of the results.

Should small business technical assistance projects disregard objectives, outcomes and deliverables? Not exactly. What is important to realize is just how dynamic and emergent a small business environment can be, and to design a planning, monitoring, and evaluating approach that accepts constant change and ambiguity as an integral element of the work – not as an undesirable aspect to be mitigated and managed away. Moreover, long-term outcomes and impacts must be the ultimate measure of a project's success, and attribution of the change-work results should never come at the expense of the change itself.

MANAGING SCALE AND GROWTH

By Esther Aba Eshun and Gordon Chan, CCLEAR
Leadership and BDSA Venture Co-Lead

For over a year now, EWB's Business Development Services Africa (BDSA) Venture has supported the growth of Creating Competitive Livestock Entrepreneurs in Agribusiness (CCLEAR), an incubator for livestock agribusinesses in Accra, Ghana. Entrepreneurs selected for CCLEAR's incubation services are provided with technical support, mentorship, and funding. These businesses also gain access to research facilities, investors, customers, and training.

Though CCLEAR was established only two years ago, it has grown rapidly. Our incubator's team has increased from two employees to six, and the number of applications has tripled to more than 250, with 42 businesses selected for incubation in our second cohort compared to only 13 businesses in our first. CCLEAR is proud of its progress, but this growth has come with a price.

Quantity Over Quality?

The approach used at CCLEAR ensures that each entrepreneur receives tailor-made services to suit their needs: experts in agriculture and management visit each business to generate personalized plans that inform their incubation. However, when there is a desire for scale and aggressive targets must be reached to satisfy donors, it becomes an issue of quantity against quality. Resources are stretched to cover more entrepreneurs, instead of serving a limited number and more effectively meeting their needs. As an example, developing these personalized plans for each of the 42 agribusinesses – located across six regions – involves time and finances from the incubator, and CCLEAR has struggled to minimize the delay for this particular service.

Financial System at the Incubator

As a private-public partnership between several stakeholders, CCLEAR uses a system whereby partners oversee incubator operations, but they are rarely physically present. Because of this, a lot of travel is needed to get cheques and other financial matters sorted out with key individuals, delaying payment for services. CCLEAR's growth requires the incubator to meet a greater number of financial obligations, while the speed of its activities and strength of relationships with suppliers and employees is significantly impacted. In some cases, service providers have become unsure of when the incubator will pay their invoices, weakening our professional reputation within the communities we serve.

Thinking Ahead and Clarifying Priorities

As the incubator expands, it is clear that supportive structures and processes must change. However, developing these new structures requires an agreement on priorities. Should CCLEAR serve greater numbers of entrepreneurs, or focus on improving the quality of its support? The incubator's staff is now experimenting with services for agribusiness associations that will hopefully enhance both quantity and quality, but there is inevitably less personal attention provided to businesses. Similarly, should CCLEAR prioritize the speed of its payments or uphold its current financial oversight? While CCLEAR maintains high ethical standards, the removal of some financial controls may create a suspicion of (and room for) corruption, which can damage the incubator's reputation.

By anticipating the implications of expansion and working with stakeholders to establish acceptable priorities and limits, organizations can better manage their growth and success.



FAILURE TO FAIL, AND TO LEARN

By Boris Martin, CEO of Engineers Without Borders

There are failures that hit you at once. The mistake is evident, and learning can be done openly on the bad choice that was made. Then there are failures that are more insidious: boiling-the-frog type failures – patterns that repeat themselves and hurt performance. It is harder to see them because they inflict lower performance over the long term, and result in invisible, missed opportunities. The failure I want to share is of this second kind.

The pattern I want to discuss is best recognized through a past example: in 2012, as part of the Executive Team, I helped decide on a new organizational structure for EWB's national office.

We presented the new structure with eloquent, logical explanations. There were strategic considerations and sophisticated arguments which were all coherent and clear. Yet the logic presented for the re-organization left other reasons unspoken. At the time, there were inter-personal conflicts that made it hard for some teams to be functional, and the split avoided that issue, rather than address it. Had we been willing to confront some of the conflicts, we may have decided not to re-organize because the new structure presented too much risk, and now, two years later, this new structure has not translated into greater performance. Looking back, it is a failure on my part for not calling out the risk.

The failure goes much beyond a bad re-organization choice to the pattern of the decision-making process. The pattern led to this failure, and I believe it has led to many failures of this kind before, and since.

In 2012, the arguments we were providing were neither grounded in evidence, nor informed by other organizations' experiences. They were logical, yes, but did the logic withstand hard evidence-based questions? Were there no other counter

arguments? We never really opened up the conversation to others. We didn't consider other alternatives, didn't play them forward, didn't imagine how they would translate into performance. Instead, I went along with the one rationale presented. In the end, confident logic, presented with vehemence, was what made the decision convincing.

This type of practice – relying on logical argumentation, without inviting hard, evidence-based questions into the decision making process – runs completely contrary to my personal claim to embrace failure, be strategic, and be open to learning.

What worries me the most is that over the past four years working at the EWB national office, I have noticed that whenever an idea is presented to me, it is usually logical and compelling, and presented as the only option. I have also noticed that I can come across as challenging and untrusting when I question someone's idea, when what I really want to do is open up the opportunity to deepen our learning, and consider alternatives. I'm working to figure out how I can bring up my questions to foster curious exploration, but I also wonder how I can make it safe for anyone to question their own ideas and those of each other more frequently, openly and safely, and for the norm to be that we carry out some due diligence when making recommendations.

I could blame everyone else for presenting ideas with no backup, no due diligence, but I would be ignoring that this is the mode of thinking that I usually use myself, and hence, likely instigate in others. I believe that what I am seeing today is only a reflection of what I ask for, and what I practice myself. The first thing to change is how I bring up, justify, and question ideas.

I have collected anecdotal evidence of the cost this type of behavior has on our organization:

- It establishes a biased pecking order. Those with the ability to have complex and logical argumentation and vehement language win the day, however bad their ideas;
- It affects every team member's confidence, especially those who are sensing rather than intuitive (in Myers Briggs terms) and who don't verbalize arguments as easily; and
- It likely misses alternatives that sensing members of our team may have advanced, though this is harder to collect evidence for – as they are missed opportunities.

This is what I will do to address this failure:

- I will open up my decisions for critical assessment grounded in real life data and observations in an effort to establish a culture of curiosity and learning;
- I will make sure at least two or three alternatives are considered whenever we make an important decision; and
- I will use plain language to make recommendations: I will say what I mean, in a way that others can understand and contrast to their own views.



PAY EARLY RATHER THAN LATER

By Mina Shahid and Mark Brown, Kulumela Co-Leads

When we set out to launch Kulumela's formal portfolio of investments, there was a lot of excitement. We had a great, experienced team, some absolutely inspiring entrepreneurs and more investor interest than we could ask for. We were excited about designing relevant and effective financing products that would unlock the potential of the Ghanaian agriculture sector, specifically for small-scale farmers. As such, we wanted to get things underway as quickly – and with as few costs – as possible. It was fine that we didn't have perfect organizational systems in place, we thought, because our team's skills and commitment would more than make up for it.

Like many start-ups, we had a lot of transitions in our first year, but the co-founders stuck around through it all. At one point, we were left with a single bank signatory in Ghana and bank statements reported to the accounting team in Canada. Our big mistake was that we should have had core accounting team members as signatories on the Ghanaian bank accounts, even if it cost us thousands of dollars more in work permit fees. Fundamentally, this is what caused the failure of our agriculture loan portfolio.

None of us anticipated it, but huge sums of money were misappropriated, and forged bank statements covered the trail for months. We have not been able to make any new investments over a nine-month period, and our operations have probably been set back a year. We have been able to deliver on investor repayment milestones – but only through huge sacrifices on the behalf of our co-founders, exhausting them financially, emotionally, and physically. The year has been extremely difficult, and as a result, we've decided to no longer pursue agriculture loans in Ghana in 2015.

We recognize that it can feel uncomfortable to build systems that feel suspicious of co-founders and early employees. You're starting something new, and it's assumed that everyone is working in the best interest of the organization – but in the end, it's always better to be safe than sorry, and it is necessary to ensure security.

This failure led to a loss of a year's worth of progress, and has significantly challenged our own potential to create positive change in the world. Despite this, we still recognize that we did some amazing work. We invested in some incredible Ghanaian agribusiness entrepreneurs who had struggled to access financing from other sources, and we've been recognized globally for our approach.

We are still healing from our experience, and we're synthesizing our learning in order to be more effective change makers in the future. We still believe in the power of agriculture investment to reduce poverty in Africa, and we're looking forward to being more resilient in our next initiative.



LEADERS ASK FOR HELP

By Isabelle Barbeau, Kumvana Program Junior Fellow

The Kumvana Program builds the capacity of dynamic leaders in Africa who are systems change entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and business leaders in their communities. The selected Kumvana leaders participate in a seven-month leadership program.

Kumvana is known for bringing many of these leaders from Africa to Canada to participate in an intensive four-week experience in Canada. I was the first to go the other way: from Canada to Ghana on a short-term basis as part of Engineers Without Borders Canada's (EWB) Junior Fellowship. As a Francophone in an English-speaking country, I faced several challenges during my placement.

My failure as a Junior Fellow was my fear of asking others for help. Because of the language barrier and my perceived lack of power compared to Venture Leaders and other EWB Fellows, I was reluctant to reach out for the support and feedback that I required for my work and final reports. This negatively impacted my performance as a Junior Fellow.

In the latter half of my placement, I built my own support network. I reached out to Kumvana Leaders in Ghana, since, I thought, they had been in my exact shoes during their time in Canada. They seemed much less intimidating to me.

My hope in communicating this story is that we build an appreciation for how scary and tremendously challenging it can be for one's performance and mental health – especially with a language barrier – to be new in a large organization like Engineers Without Borders Canada. I let that fear prevent me from asking for help at first, but as I reached out to Kumvana Leaders, I saw the value in making myself vulnerable to them and creating my own support network.

These interactions made me realize that being a leader includes being able to ask for help from the right individuals, at the right time.

More broadly, I think it's valuable to look to the institutional level. My failure to ask for help taught me that power dynamics and language barriers can be a hurdle to doing great work. As such, I have come away from the Junior Fellowship as a champion for fostering a culture of consideration, patience, understanding, and open-mindedness.

Finally, I want to be part of creating support systems that bring to life the EWB values of striving for humility and investing in people so as to enable and empower the next generation of change makers.



THE LEARNING CURVE

By Souzan Mirza, President of McMaster Chapter

One of the greatest failures at the McMaster Chapter last year was the lack of cohesiveness among our executive group – we had taken on too many new members, and didn't invest in their understanding of Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB). This failure led to a lack of support, poor dissemination of information, and dwindling motivation and commitment within our team.

After some collective reflection, our team identified the key reason for this failure. The application process to become a leader in our chapter was very informal – anyone could apply, allowing us to bring in new talent. We thought that by giving someone a leadership position, an increased sense of ownership over their role and responsibilities would follow. However, this was often not the case – we deeply underestimated the learning curve our new members would experience and failed to appreciate the challenges they would face due to their lack of familiarity with the organization. This, as well as an absence of social activities, resulted in very tenuous relationships between members, which exacerbated the communications divide.

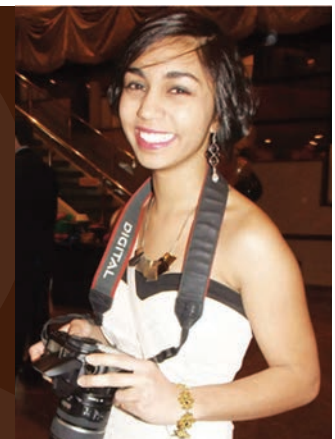
Although we were all working toward the same goals and had interest in development work, we could not translate these shared passions into meaningful relationships because we were unable to effectively invest in a team with so many new members. This meant that there were redundancies in our work, lower retention rates within our action teams, and less accessible support.

From our failures last year, we learned many valuable lessons. We learned that when choosing a managerial team it is important to choose in part from your existing talent pool, as they already have a working knowledge of the role and the organization.

We also learned that having a personal connection to the people within your organization leads to an improvement in performance in a leadership position. In conclusion, we learned we should prioritize the value of experience when creating a team, but also couple it with a commitment to invest in the capacity of our new members to develop an effective and cohesive team.



"There were redundancies in our work, lower **retention rates** within our action teams, and less accessible support."



FAILURE TO LET GO

By Quinn Conlon, University of Toronto Chapter
Youth Engagement Co-Lead

In my final year of high school, myself and the leader of the University of Windsor Chapter's Youth Venture Portfolio developed the High school Outreach Program Experience (HOPE) team, a small group of students grades 9-12 from schools all over the city that were passionate about international development. Upon finishing high school and moving to Toronto for university last September, I joined a similar portfolio at UofT, and developed a new HOPE team in Toronto. I was fortunate enough to work with some truly incredible high school students last year – passionate, capable, and critical individuals that poured a lot of effort into building a foundation for HOPE. While the HOPE team had a very successful pilot year in Toronto, I believe that my failure to let go of my position of leadership took away from the potential experience of some of the members, and hurt the sustainability of our movement.

When I began the Toronto Chapter's HOPE team, I was determined to be an effective university coordinator – providing support and guidance when requested but allowing the students to determine their own priorities and chart their own course. However, as the year progressed it became clear that I wasn't fulfilling this commitment. Rather than facilitating discussion, I found that I frequently dominated conversation in meetings, potentially speaking over students that may have had other opinions or perspectives to share. I also gradually became far more involved in the team than was healthy or sustainable, offering to take on tasks and projects that should have been delegated to other students.

At the time, I justified my involvement as concern for the students and a desire not to overload our members.

Reflecting back with honesty, I believe that my over-involvement was the result of my averseness to relinquish control of a project in which I was so deeply and passionately invested. By offering to take on work that would have otherwise been done by the students I was unwittingly denying them meaningful learning opportunities. I had tied the project to my identity, and ultimately failed to fully empower the students whose leadership abilities I had originally committed to developing.

One of the greatest challenges in founding and developing a project is acknowledging when it has grown to a point where it requires something outside of what you can offer. There tends to be a lingering reluctance to let go, a subtle unwillingness to remove yourself from the system. My experience helped me to recognize that we need to put the project first and accept when demands have shifted – we have to critically ask ourselves what's best for our cause, not for our egos. Empowering others to grow into positions of leadership allows the project to be exposed to different perspectives, enabling it to grow in ways we never could achieve by keeping it to ourselves.

This year the Toronto HOPE team is up and running again, but I've delegated the role of university coordinator to an individual with a vastly different approach to leadership – organized, level-headed, and naturally adept at facilitating discussion without becoming too involved. While it's been difficult to remove myself, I have faith in the team's passion and purpose – I'm excited to watch its new direction unfold.

JUST NOT GOOD ENOUGH

By Jeeshan Ahmed, University of Regina Chapter
Global Engineering Lead

The Global Engineering (GE) team at the University Of Regina Chapter of Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) was thrilled to launch its inaugural Global Engineering Competition on campus this year. The GE team consisted of the Director of GE, Dumo Fiabema, as well as EWB members Arsalan Khan, Damien Bolingbroke, our faculty advisor, Dr. Denise Stilling, and me. The GE team was fortunate to have the support of the entire chapter in the planning of the event. As this was our first competition, we made some mistakes and learned some difficult lessons – namely, we came to appreciate the critical importance of investing in capacity and ownership.

Actual Failure

One of the chapter's top goals for the 2013-14 academic year was to promote Global Engineering concepts in the Engineering Faculty, so we thought it would be a great idea to encourage students to participate in a competition that involved case studies on gender diversity, local environmental problems, and a few of EWB's African Ventures.

However, we failed to invest in the participants' capacity, which prevented them from drawing meaningful learning from the case studies or identifying the root causes of the issues they were presented with. At the same time, we didn't reach out to our panel of judges when developing the case studies, which resulted in them being less engaged in the topics than we had hoped.

What Was Learned?

After the competition, our team identified two key learnings that we could take from the experience.

We realized we had assumed participants would have prior knowledge specific to our organization; we didn't spend enough time with the participants coaching them on how to approach the problem scenarios. Going forward, we need to do a better job designing the case studies so that they give participants clear directions on the path to take.

We neglected to build ownership in our judges. Rather than collaborate with them on the development of the case studies, we simply completed the case studies on our own, and told the judges how to go about evaluating them. By improving our communication with the judges, particularly in the planning phase, we would enable them to evaluate presentations more effectively and provide better feedback.

So What?

On both fronts, we failed to invest and communicate with the key stakeholders involved in our competition. When running a project with multiple stakeholders, it's far too easy to lose touch and assume decisions and information developed in a centralized group will reach everyone else. In reality, we learned that we need to be proactive in reaching out during the planning and executing stages to ensure that all parties are informed, engaged, and invested in the purpose of the project, so that they can effectively participate.

Our first GE competition proved to be a challenging and difficult learning process. That said, we're proud of the change we created, and we're excited to have another crack at hosting a successful GE competition next year!

“YOU NEVER CAME TO VISIT”

By Rebecca Kresta, WatSan Junior Fellow

I walked down the dust roads in rural Malawi, on the way to meet a potential host family with whom I would live during my four-month internship working with Engineers Without Borders Canada’s (EWB) Water and Sanitation (WatSan) Venture. My mind wandered to thoughts of what the family would be like: images of playing with host siblings, learning to cook over a fire, and learning about life in Malawi played through my head. This, I thought to myself, was the only way to understand poverty, and through extension, to understand the work I was doing.

My heart sank as I saw a white house with a car in the carport and a satellite dish beckoning from the roof. If this was to be the basis of my immersive local experience – I noted dictionaries on the bookshelf and doilies on the easy chair backs with dismay – how would I learn here?

After a brief conversation with my coach, I thanked the older couple that lived in the house, a professor and a nurse, for their offer but explained that I was looking for something different in my placement. They nodded, understanding, and invited me to come visit anytime.

Four months later, I wished the couple farewell as I wrapped up my internship experience. “But you never came to visit,” the husband said sadly, seeming genuinely disappointed. I quickly apologized and said a hasty goodbye. To myself, I justified my lack of responsiveness by thinking that they had only invited me once, and never reached out again, so how could I know that they actually wanted me to visit, and weren’t merely being polite?

When I came home, and reflected with other Junior Fellows, I started to come to terms with some of the critical assumptions I had made prior to and during my placement. I failed to recognize that there are different standards of living in Malawi,

just as there are in Canada; I failed to move past the stories that limited my ability to learn. I also failed to recognize that one invitation is enough to be welcomed.

Prior to my placement, as I listened to stories from past JFs, I subconsciously created a defined box within which my host family had to live. I went overseas feeling proud that I had moved beyond so many stereotypes about Africa: Tarzan would not be my host brother, and I would not see kids with flies on their faces. I came home humbled: there are university professors in Malawi that put doilies on their armchairs. They are as much a part of Malawi as low-income families, and they had just as much to teach me. By failing to visit, my assumptions about host families were compounded because I lost another chance to learn.

My caricatured image of host families was reinforced by organizational stories of what a host family should be like. As an organization and as individuals, we need to challenge the pervasive stereotypes of ‘real Africa,’ and embrace the vastly diverse array of experiences of what life in Malawi or Ghana can be.



MONITORING, EVALUATING, AND ADAPTING TO FAILURE IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM

By Malawi Water and Sanitation Venture

Last year, the Malawi Water and Sanitation Venture developed a new approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that would allow us to capture the successes and failures of our initiatives more systematically.

Our program evaluation in March 2014 showed we had failed to achieve five of our eleven strategic objectives. However, underlying each of these failures was the recognition that certain aspects of our M&E system failed to assist us in effectively adapting to failures as they emerged, and in capturing indications of progress in line with our strategic objectives.

For example, one strategic objective was to improve learning channels between district water offices. At our mid-year review, it was clear that our chosen approach, built on a reporting template, would fail to produce the learning channels we had envisioned. Though we shifted our approach, we were not left with enough time to achieve the objective. In this case, we had defined our indicators at the approach level, measuring our success against establishing the reporting template specifically, rather than the objective of improving learning channels. In this and other cases, while we had naturally pivoted approaches to deliver on our strategic objectives, we did not have a well-defined or implemented process to proactively adjust approaches or to adjust indicators to match them.

Working in a complex system requires holding a number of strategic objectives constant, while at the same time iterating the approaches through which to achieve them.

Organizations who work on complex problems need to build M&E systems that allow this through:

- Incorporating ongoing short-term, or formative, evaluations that encourage proactive shifts in approaches to avoid failure. Approaches to achieve an objective might need to change over a planned time period.
- Layering indicators. Keep one set of indicators fixed at the strategic objective level, and have a second set that can be modified to track the success of specific, changeable approaches.

In our next iteration of the system, we plan to build in clear processes for formative evaluations and adjusting indicators appropriately. We hope this will allow us to proactively explore new approaches, and replace or complement failing approaches to deliver on the given timeframe, while allowing us to measure progress against our overall strategic objectives even as we pivot approaches to attain them.



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