A Comprehensive Internationalization Challenge: Learning from Failure Or, When Your Best Just Isn't Good Enough

Carl V. Patton, Ph.D.
President Emeritus, Georgia State University

We are told from childhood to learn from our mistakes and to pick ourselves up and start all over again. Moreover, self-help literature abounds on "the art of failing", "making peace with failure", "moving past failure", etc.

Do we want to improve our internationalization competency by learning from failure? How many of us will even admit that we failed at something? Let's be realistic. We've all failed. So, if we are going to learn from failure, improve our skills at internationalization, and manage strategic change, we need to understand why policies and programs fail.

Types of Failures[1]

There are a range of failures, from minimal mistakes and errors we make every day, through failures that give us a life lesson, to catastrophic failures that are extremely difficult from which to recover. In the sciences, there are failures that lead to new insights, for example the mistakes along the way to the invention of a new drug that result in other drug discoveries. I want to focus on the more common types of failures that professionals encounter in their work lives: program/project or policy failures.

From childhood we are told that failure builds character, and if we haven't failed, we haven't tried. In our professional lives, when we've had a project fail, we've either been blamed for it or have had a supervisor tell us that the project may have failed, but we are not a failure. Much of this has been codified in current-day professional advice.[2]

Rather than being an exception, project failure is normal. It takes many forms. No matter how hard we think, we can't come up with the right answer. No matter how hard we try to implement a new project, things don't work out.

Let's think about one of our Internationalization Failures

Why did our idea not work out? How did a program fail? Why did we get unintended consequences? Who is to blame? Could it be that our best just isn't good enough? There are many reasons policies, programs and projects fail,[3] but there are two primary types of policy failures. There is ***program*** failure, where a good solution is implemented badly, and there is ***theory*** failure, where a bad solution is implemented perfectly. A bad solution could be implemented badly, and I will touch on that later.

Failure can be informative if shared. This means that we as professionals should report on failures as well as successes. However, few professionals will admit their mistakes since failures are seldom rewarded. Moreover, many failures that could provide useful guidance are not shared

because most journals have a "success" bias. Oftentimes, however, a policy failure where "NO" was the answer can provide useful information.

Theory Failures

One of my failures involved paying students to study abroad. Throughout my career, I had taken students to study abroad. In fact, I co-founded a study abroad program in Greece in the mid-1970s. Students always struggled with finding enough money to study abroad, so I felt that if only more funding could be provided, we could entice additional students to study abroad.

When I became a university president, I was involved in developing a fund that would help finance such students. The program was implemented properly, but the theory was incorrect.[4] While the program had numerous positive benefits, and the additional money helped make it easier for students who already intended to study abroad to do so, it did not attract additional students. Controlling for increases in total student body size, the additional funds did not result in a greater proportion of the university's students involved in international study.

A second "NO" example involves the many states across the nation that developed merit-based scholarships to increase the number of STEM degrees. This was another incorrect theory, as it ***reduced*** the probability that students would earn STEM degrees.[5] Essentially, students who entered the STEM fields but who could not maintain the "B" average required to retain the scholarships, transferred to non-STEM fields in order to keep their financial aid. Both of these examples would be considered *theory* failures: they were bad ideas.

Program Failures

There are also *program* failures where a good idea is implemented badly. Implementation fails in many ways. In addition to obvious reasons we all have experienced (inadequate communication, poorly trained staff, poorly motivated staff, etc.), many failures result from not gaining consensus on outcomes before implementation as well as from problem redefinition by superiors during implementation. And, of course, we cannot forget that political reality can skew program implementation. Sometimes, it is just the wrong time for a particular idea.

Even worse, design and implementation are often two separate processes. If the implementation staff are not involved in the design process, there are certainly going to be disconnects. There is a lot of talk about leaders needing to empower staff, and I would argue that that means senior officials should involve implementation staff in the design phase. The staff members on the front lines know what works and what doesn't. The flip side of this coin is that staff have an obligation to continue developing the skills needed to do their jobs.

Sadly, even when designers and implementers work together, things can go wrong. If staff members could quickly tell superiors when things are not going well without fear of recrimination, bad results could more often be avoided. Too often this communication does not happen. Superiors and staff frequently dig deeper and deeper holes when projects start to derail. Part of this has to do with the fear of being blamed for the underachievement, but another aspect

may have to do with misunderstanding sunk costs: the program equivalent of putting in good money after bad. This reluctance to halt a poor project also has to do with cogitative dissonance, and, unfortunately, error denial increases as we go up the organization chart. All of this is another way of saying that there are more ways to fail than to succeed. An example of this is the case of cheating in the Atlanta Public Schools.

Theory and Program Failures

Cheating in the Atlanta Public Schools by teachers who changed student answers on tests is an example of both a theory failure and a program implementation failure.[6] This well-known and well documented case involved the idea of paying for teacher performance. The core idea was that paying teachers for performance based on their students' test performance would cause students to learn (test higher). Student performance on standardized tests did not increase, and teachers resorted to changing student answers on scantron sheets. Paying teachers for student performance was a bad theory.

This program was also implemented badly in that teachers were not properly trained for remedial teaching, and there was a pervasive culture of fear in the school system. The superintendent ruled by intimidation.

The unintended consequences of this was that the combination of performance bonuses and non-forgiving leadership led teachers to cheat. There were even "erasure parties" where teachers got together over pizza to change the answers on student answer sheets. Unfortunately, many people throughout the school district knew about this cheating but failed to come forward for fear of self-incrimination or retribution. When statistical analyses of testing results indicated irregularities, a state-level investigation uncovered the truth. Numerous teachers and administrators were eventually tried, convicted and lost their jobs. A number were even sent to prison. Of course, the students suffered irreparable harm.

The private sector has also been involved in these kind of cheating and cover up scandals. Volkswagen[7] and Takata[8] are two well-known examples in which an organization's managers are not forgiving and errors do not necessarily drive change. This kind of behavior encourages people to cover up mistakes or cheat. Of course, the problem worsens as it fails to be addressed. Eventually the failure is exposed, colleagues blame one another, morale declines, fines mount, and employees even fear jail time.

In the Volkswagen case, like in so many others, the problems were well known throughout the organization years before they became public, yet they were covered up rather than the knowledge leading to corrections.[9]

Learning from Failure

Failure usually has repercussions, and most of us eventually pay for our mistakes. Airline pilot crews have the best record of avoiding punishment by reporting personal and colleague mistakes, apparently because the potential cost of not reporting is death.[10]

What do these several case examples have to tell us about improving our professional practices in the area of internationalization?

In terms of management responsibilities, we need to ask *why* something failed, not who did it. We need to delegate authority as well as responsibility and give immediate feedback. I mentioned above that "NO" is sometimes an answer, so we need to kill a project if it is not solving the problem, solving the wrong problem, or is impossible to implement.

Likewise, these cases tell us that staff have responsibilities as well. Staff members need to feel they can alert those in authority when disaster looms. And, we need to fail fast. A quick termination of a bad idea is much better than a prolonged loss. We have to realize that this failure is not necessarily the end and that programs can have multiple deaths and rebirths. And a suggestion in these litigious times: preserve your project records and protect your back.

We can learn from failure, as failure can fine tune efforts for the future, but we need to keep a play book and share our failures with colleagues, as hard as that might be. We should also use failure to assess our own capabilities. What education /training do we need? We might also ask if a particular job is worth our effort. And, these failure episodes should let us question ourselves: are we cut out for leadership? Why do we keep seeking promotions?[11] Most of us are programmed for progress. We think more is better. Stability looks and feels like failure. Perhaps experiencing a failure is the proper time to assess our professional and life goals.

Moreover, managers need to realize that we share the blame when we give subordinates impossible tasks. We also share the blame when we do not enable subordinates to obtain the tools for success. It is important to realize that subordinates will learn from failure only if (the organization) is forgiving.

Takeaways

Some ideas are not worth implementing, and fine ideas are often implemented inadequately. "NO" is an answer, if only we pay attention. Unfortunately, there are more ways to fail than to succeed. As a result, we should not be afraid to fail fast and share our failures with our colleagues. As difficult as it is, we need to have the courage to speak truth to power when things are not going right.

A Modest Proposal

At the 2016 Phi Beta Delta International conference held in conjunction with NAFSA, I made the proposal for the "Outstanding Failure" award. I suggested that this award ought to be given annually by Phi Beta Delta and NAFSA for the failure that teaches us the most, in order to encourage us to share our failures. I meant this proposal in all seriousness. Both of these organizations are supportive of staff development; continuous improvement and learning from failure should be part of the process. If there were easier access to internationalization ideas that failed, we could more rapidly improve our professional competence.

A Cautionary Conclusion

We can do our personal best and still fail. We need to support our colleagues, have a life outside of work, keep learning new things and be ready to move on.

Failure is going to happen. The question is: How we will respond?

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About the Author

Carl V. Patton, President Emeritus and Professor of Public Management and Policy at Georgia State University, has taught and conducted research across the U.S. and in Greece, Indonesia and China. During the 1970s and 1980s he co-developed and ran a for-credit study abroad program in Greece. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of California, Berkeley. With David Sawicki and Jennifer Clark he recently published the third edition of *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning.* His other book topics include quick answers to quantitative problems, infrastructure deterioration, user-built housing in developing nations, and early retirement options. He serves on the boards of Legacy Ventures and the Haberman Foundation.

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[1] Adapted from Firestein, 2016

[2] Allan, 2014; James, 2011; Bacal; Tardanico, 2012.

[3] Patton, Sawicki and Clark, 2013.

[4] Patton 2009.

[5] Sjoquist and Winters, August 2015; Sjoquist and Winters 2013; Davis, 2016.

[6] Georgia Public Policy Foundation, 2015; Strauss 2015.

[7] Goodman, 2015.

[8] Crawley, 2016.

[9] Two years before the compromised pollution control systems were installed in 2009 for cars that were sold to the public, Wolfgang Hatz, head of diesel engine development at Volkswagen, was filmed complaining about the expectations of the California Air resources Board (Davenport and Hakim 2016). Moreover, there is a report of a 2006 Volkswagen PowerPoint on how to cheat the emissions tests (Ewing 2006).

[10] Syed 2015.

[11] Based on Brooks 2015.