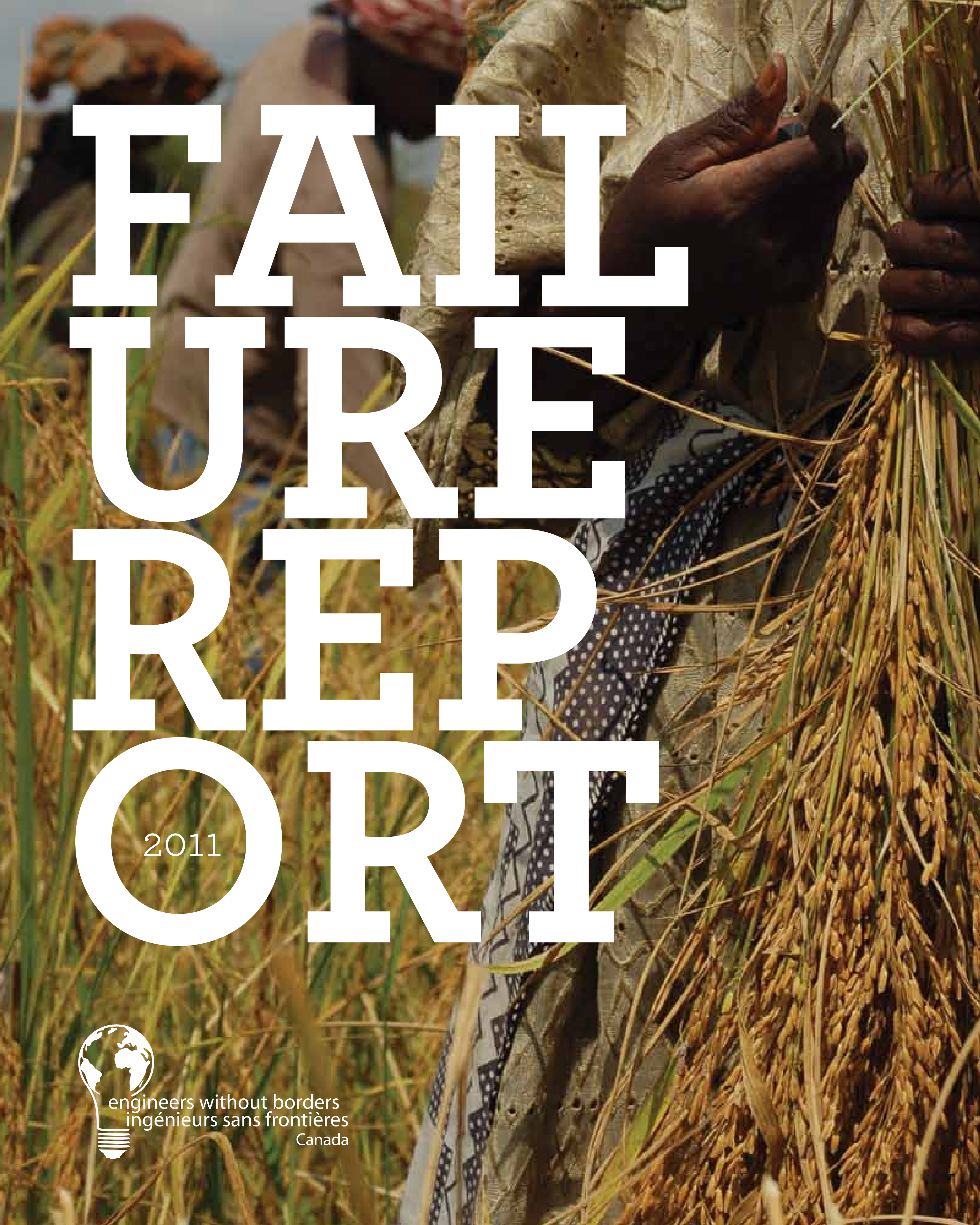

FAILURE REPORT

2011

engineers without borders
ingénieurs sans frontières
Canada

My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon.

– Mizuta Masahide

Only the humble improve.

– Wynton Marsalis

◂ Photo: Don D'Souza/EWB

Foreword

Sarah Elizabeth Lewis
Author

For some, admitting failure can be nearly impossible, never mind learning from it. If an international development organization rescues children from poverty or executes rescue missions from natural disasters—tsunamis, hurricanes and more—it can be difficult to reveal how and why things did not go as planned. In some quarters, there is such cynicism about the efficacy of development aid that conceding defeat, even for an instant, is inconceivable. The competition to secure funding has also created a palpable reticence to disclose mistakes and failures. Yet, try as we might to eliminate failure from the natural process of achieving any goal, we instinctively seem to know that learning from it has a transformative, irreplaceable, propellant power.

The gift of failure is a riddle. Like the number zero it can be both the void and the start of infinite possibility. So how do we multiply something by zero and increase its value? How exactly does a setback become an aid? As it turns out, there is a way.

One Canadian organization's courageous self-criticality launched an initiative that became an illuminative beacon for international development. Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada has dared to speak publicly about their setbacks, not only to improve the efficacy of their international aid, but in the hopes of getting their peers to talk about their failures with greater transparency as well. It has been groundbreaking, one of the great catalytic moments in the field.

"Impressive." "Bold leadership." These were the words that William H. Gates Sr., Co-Chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, used to describe EWB's initiative in the Foreword he penned for the 2010 *Failure Report*. His conclusion? "I am optimistic that this good example will strengthen the global dialogue on how to learn from failure to achieve the greatest impact for those who are looking to serve." His prediction has already come true. Other international development organizations have begun to consider the admission of failure as a productive mode of initiating improvement. It has fed a larger discussion of international development aid efficacy within other NGOs, organizations such as the Stanford Innovation Institute, and on the pages of journals such as *The Guardian*.

The 2011 *Failure Report*, which features self-reflections on breakdowns in communication, leadership, and transparency, shows the perceptual gains that only occur when an organization pays attention to the very things we often avoid on the road to success. We make discoveries, breakthroughs and inventions in part because we are free enough to acknowledge when we have fallen short of our stated goals. As an outgrowth of humility, transparency, and self-criticality at the heart of EWB, the organization launched an interactive web portal, AdmittingFailure.com, to broaden the conversations that began with the 2008 *Failure Report* across the field between NGOs, donors and related governments. It has served as a reminder to courageous funders that 100% success means something is wrong. As one put it to me, "it means that we're either choosing very simple issues, or we're lying about our results."

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As stated on AdmittingFailure.com, the alternative to this benevolent form of whistleblowing on themselves is similar to this situation: "A mistake is made somewhere in rural Tanzania. It is not publicized—a donor might be upset. Two years later, the same mistake is repeated in Ghana. Six months later in Mali. And so the story continues as it has for over 60 years." Inspired by the iterative approach in innovation, EWB knows that "by hiding our failures, we are condemning ourselves to repeat them and we are stifling innovation. In doing so, we are condemning ourselves to continue under-performing in the development sector."

The remarkable individuals at EWB are as humble about their approach as they are bold in having initiated this manner of public disclosure. They are certainly aware of the potential asymmetry regarding who determines what constitutes failure in the context of development aid. Yet their approach has made them more aware of the many stakeholders involved in their work, liberating them from what William Easterly describes as "the West's self-pleasing fantasy that 'we' were the chosen ones to save the Rest." Instead, they believe that the community with a challenge might have the seed of the solution within it as well.

The Failure Report is about conversion, not about momentary defeat. It is about the story of human capacity. It is fueled by the desire to ignite change within the field of international development. The model EWB presents is the critical idea that success is only possible if we include a rigorous analysis of its seeming opposite.

Scholar, writer, and curator Sarah Lewis is currently finishing her book, "Rise," under contract with Simon & Schuster (U.S., 2013 release), HarperCollins (U.K.) and in over 6 countries to date. Drawing on her work in the arts and expanding into sports, business, psychology, sociology, and science, "Rise" explores the advantage of resilience and so-called failure in successful creative human endeavors. Selected for Oprah's 2010 "Power List," and included as a member of President Obama's Arts Policy Committee, her writing has been published widely. She received her B.A. from Harvard University, an M.Phil from Oxford University, and will receive her PhD from Yale University in 2012.

2011 Failure Report

Introduction

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In the dynamic and complex world of international development, the path of a systemic innovation – from the spark of a good idea to lasting change – is one of prototypes, failures, learning and the eventual scaling of innovations that work.

With this process in mind, I welcome you to the 2011 *Failure Report*. Read as 14 members of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada, from every level of the organization, share their stories with humility, self-reflection and dedication to learning – fundamental components of EWB's culture and values.

The role of failure within EWB's culture continues to evolve. This year, some authors chose to write about program- and team-level failures; some involved partners and other stakeholders in assessing and writing their stories and learnings. These failures are harder to talk about as they implicate people other than the author. While the risk is greater, the payoff is too – open dialogue, trust, and learning, rich with nuance and a range of perspectives that can serve to make our relationships, and our work, stronger.

But publishing our failures is not an end in itself. We talk about our failures to keep ourselves open to learning, and we learn in order to enhance our ability to create systemic change, as well as the speed at which we achieve it.

Last year's report asked readers to revisit past reports and reflect on whether we had learned or repeated the same mistakes again. I took this challenge to heart, and while my reading did not reveal any repeated failures, I did find trends in the types of failures to which EWB seems particularly susceptible. In particular, the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit EWB prides itself on can come with downfalls, making us quick to jump on opportunities without taking the time to fully understand the situation, stakeholders and risks needed to plan effectively.

We also fall prey to a common cause of failure in the development sector, specifically: misaligned incentive structures that skew responsibility and ownership. Finally, we have a tendency to set goals which exceed our capacity to deliver; no doubt a direct result of the ambition and passion for which EWB is known.

Reading through past reports also shows that, without a doubt, we did not know much about publishing failures when we started these reports. All we had was a culture that supported the idea, despite the risk. By taking that risk we created the possibility to learn from it. In the case of the failure report, we are in

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the process of learning how to learn. Now in the fourth year of publishing, trends are starting to appear, and we have had the chance to use this awareness to make failures foreseeable and therefore avoidable.

The *Failure Report* is a microcosm for the learning happening throughout the organization. We write a failure report and through this exercise discover how we can become a stronger learning organization, just as we test ideas as prototypes, reflect, and try again to discover ways to create systemic social change.

Learning from failure is a ubiquitous need. The fact that EWB invests in often unproven, early-stage ideas knowing they could fail just makes this truth all the more relevant. Forever innovating and searching, EWB will continue to fail – but always with a mind to constant re-evaluation of our understanding of the problems we are addressing, and continuous adaptation of our innovations. **F**

Mismatched Timescales

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Last year, we decided to approach the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) about the systemic innovations our agriculture teams had been prototyping. The partnership could potentially result in $800,000 invested in EWB, and could enable massive change in agriculture development projects. When we drafted our concept note, Anna-Marie Silvester and Colleen Duncan were leading teams working in Ghana, Zambia and Malawi. AGRA's investment would make it possible to amplify the work we were doing already.

AGRA liked our approach on the ground because we were creating new learning systems by ensuring staff and managers embraced learning and had the ability to manage and improve the new systems. We were excited and ready to deliver.

When we began this process, I assumed that we could build a partnership with AGRA in less than three months, and I set expectations accordingly. This was misguided.

Drafting a concept note took a couple of weeks. We received feedback on it a month later. We then moved to a first draft – which took a few weeks more to write, and took another few months to review in Nairobi. The same cycle repeated again and again, while we slowly moved towards a final partnership proposal. All together, the process took more than twelve months.

Throughout this period, Colleen and Anna-Marie continued managing their teams from a challenging space. They were both hedging – in case we received significant funding to scale with AGRA – and trying to lead their country strategies at the same time. They were growing frustrated, and rightfully so. Slowly, they also realized that the vision for impact they held was not feasible within the expected time frame. The African Program Staff on each of the teams were also growing impatient with the resulting ambiguity of their team's long-term strategy.

Overall, this caused a loss of momentum in our ability to deliver value to local partners, and ultimately benefit Dorothy.

I failed to realize that AGRA does not function on the same timescale as EWB does.

We were ready to deliver at day zero, by virtue of the fact that EWB innovates from the bottom up. AGRA, on the other hand, is used to receiving hundreds of funding proposals, and spends six months to a year approving them. This is the way it works.

Going forward, it poses a question about the funding mechanisms that constitute the majority of development money. Is there a timescale match between needs on the ground (which are often location-specific, complex, dynamic, diverse and unpredictable) and the administrative process of reviewing project proposals, hiring staff, and implementation?

This experience affirmed my belief that our programs need a strong base of unconstrained funding, and that we may have to stay forever away from project based partnerships. But when I look back at the hardship this created, I can only wish I had had a better understanding of the timescales when the initial decision was made. **F**

The Communication Iceberg

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In December 2010, I walked into the office of Peter Goldring, MP for Edmonton East and member of the Committee for Foreign Affairs and International Development, looking to facilitate the creation of a relationship with the EWB University of Alberta chapter.

EWB had recently begun the chapter-based political advocacy program. Chapters were encouraged to meet and start building relationships with local MPs with the goals of introducing MPs to EWB's campaign for more effective aid and increasing chapter capacity for political advocacy work.

I thought that this was the first contact Mr. Goldring had had with EWB, and planned to introduce Mr. Goldring to our work and begin talking about aid effectiveness. However, I soon found out that he knew EWB well – he was, in fact, coming to our Conference in January and was planning a trip to visit our projects in Ghana.

This was a failure of communication between EWB's National Office and I. Neither of us had communicated our advocacy activities and I hadn't enquired to see if there was an existing relationship at the national level.

Because of this failure I missed an opportunity to build off of previous discussions between EWB and Mr. Goldring. I could have asked questions and encouraged critical thought around his participation in the conference, as well as what he hoped to achieve by going to Ghana.

Looking beyond a simple communication failure, this is a knowledge management failure at an organizational level. The systems to capture the information, the processes to use it, and the buy-in from everyone to maintain relevancy all need to be improved to increase the effectiveness of our work on Parliament Hill. Such improvements are also needed to enable EWB to do a better job of leveraging our distributed network of chapters and city networks across the country, which match the distributed nature of MPs.

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This failure illustrated to me the importance of knowledge management. As proof of my learning, before my next meeting with Mr. Goldring I emailed EWB's Director of Advocacy, James Haga, to understand how the relationship with

Mr. Goldring had progressed.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Lying below the water's surface is the need for systemic improvements in communication and knowledge transfer within EWB. All actors need to value and prioritize sharing information if these systems are to help us learn and improve our work. It's not just about new systems for sharing information, but about the behaviour change needed for continuous improvement.

Because of this learning, I have become a champion within my chapter and EWB to make knowledge management and communication a priority. By integrating knowledge management, as well as monitoring and evaluation into my own activities, I believe I can mobilize others to do the same. **F**

Insight Before Influence:
The Need to Stay Grounded in the Field

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My year-long placement with a large value-chains project in Northern Ghana began with a three-month exploration period, where I was encouraged to explore the local maize, rice, and soya sectors – to build knowledge of and insights into market dynamics and farmer behaviour that would later inform project strategy and innovations. The project's goal was to enhance these local sectors so that they could compete with imported products, ensuring local farmers have markets to sell their crops and opportunities to prosper.

During this period, I was given the freedom to visit farmers in their homes and fields, and to embed myself in different businesses to see the challenges from an inside perspective. I didn't do it. I was drawn to the structures and incentives within my partner organization and wanted to figure out why they were causing project staff to act and speak in certain ways. Slowly, my focus began to shift. Time that was supposed to be dedicated to building an understanding of local markets, businesses, and farmers was more and more frequently dedicated to understanding my partner organization.

I shifted my role from staff capacity-building to managing the strategy for the inputs and equipment sector of the project. I believed that filling this leadership gap would allow me to have greater impact than I would with capacity building, so I jumped at the opportunity. But my lack of field insight meant I couldn't confidently drive my vision of a transformed market system, and I was unable to provide the strong technical direction that could have led to a more integrated approach by staff in different parts of the country. I had failed.

I needed deeper knowledge and insights to be effective in the leadership role I had chosen to fill; the same knowledge and insights that I'd had the opportunity to develop, but ignored. My personal desire to create "more" change outweighed the need to build the knowledge required to make change happen.

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I'm certainly not the first person in the development sector to make this mistake. We regularly make assumptions about the way things work (in this case, input firms and farmers) without getting into the field to challenge our preconceived notions, and without fully understanding the existing system before trying to change it.

As a result of this failure, I've come to appreciate why EWB strongly recommends that staff spend time in the field, immersing themselves in the dynamics of farmer-business interactions. I recognize this is a principle on which we cannot compromise. This practice provides us with the field insights and understanding required to determine which innovations have the greatest potential to create systemic change for Ghana's smallholder farmers. Just as importantly, it helps us remain grounded and connected to those farmers, ensuring that we can see things from their perspective. **F**

Agriculture As a Business Fails to Scale

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Agriculture contributes to 35.8% of Ghana's GDP (2006) and provides the main source of livelihood for about 60% of the population. In rural northern Ghana, over 80% of people earn their income from farming, but lack the education and business skills to run their farms as profitable businesses.

EWB has been working with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) in Ghana since 2004. In 2007, we began work with MoFA staff to develop a training program for farmers called Agriculture As a Business (AAB). Its objectives were to:

1. Build strong Farmer-Based Organizations (FBOs) with a united purpose,
2. Train farmers in business skills and decision-making,
3. Build MoFA extension capacity in FBO development and promote agriculture as a business.

For over two years, EWB staff, alongside MoFA's best field staff, were developing, designing, testing and adapting a series of training modules. Together they drove the development of AAB, working to understand the program's strengths and weaknesses in implementation. This combined effort led to great ownership of AAB among EWB staff and top-performing MoFA staff, but not among district management.

The underlying hypothesis was that MoFA's management would see the value in this tool, and would subsequently coordinate its expansion. This hypothesis was based on previous scale successes, previous adoption of EWB tools, and verbal verification of interest from MoFA leadership – but this hypothesis was not tested until too late.

This was our failure. We were building strong relationships with MoFA as we built the AAB tool, but we weren't building ownership beyond a handful of top-performing staff. EWB also lagged in defining sustainable success. In addition to this, AAB's independent implementation plan (without EWB's support) wasn't developed until 2009, which was too late. The staff in these districts were accustomed to EWB driving the AAB program and weren't ready to take ownership and drive the program without EWB's presence.

We also assumed that donors and the Ministry would continue to prioritize support for, and investment in, Farmer-Based Organizations. This was incorrect. Incentive structures in MoFA are largely top-down and driven by NGOs or donor projects that contribute funds to the district. Therefore, if those at the top decide not to invest in FBO development, it's very difficult for a district to maintain this priority on their own. The AAB program faced unfavourable odds no matter what it achieved.

This is not to say that there aren't MoFA staff who are driven to do the best work for farmers, despite the political priorities of the day. But they can't yet overcome an incentive system where money, power, and promotions carry a heavy weight. Additionally, they must follow directional orders from management.

Today, of the twenty districts that received AAB training, roughly only three of them are still using it in a significant way. In most districts, MoFA staff were confused and disappointed when EWB left them to carry on alone without any additional support. Only the most motivated, hard-working and independent field staff are still using the tool.

This is an especially frustrating failure because the tool worked, and it worked well. But it wasn't enough to overcome the deep-rooted incentive system within MoFA.

What could we have done differently?

There are two possible answers to this question:

1. Before we began development, we could have established a conditional agreement with top leaders to expand the program if results warranted, all while operating within MoFA's existing incentive structures.
2. We could have separated the audience for the testing and development phase from the sustainability and ownership phase. We could have developed AAB with one group of MoFA staff, but when it came time to test if MoFA could implement the tool unaided, we could have worked with a different group. This may have created less confusion about EWB's role in the initiative and potentially increased ownership and sustainability of the tool in new districts.

Going forward

- We've realized that trends change, just as politics and donors do. We need to track these evolutions more closely and evolve our strategies simultaneously.
- AAB is a great tool that works well, but a district-by-district approach to implementation is virtually impossible given the current incentives in the government system.
- We must strive to understand who makes decisions and how a tool could be institutionalized within MoFA in the future.
- We have had a lot of interest from the private sector and NGOs to use the tool in other contexts. We will generate extra revenue by developing a training package and scaling it through other partners.
- In developing new tools, we will ensure buy-in from senior management, as well as a plan for scaling that we can test before investing many resources in prototyping and piloting. **F**

Lessons Learned in District Selection

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This year, EWB's Governance and Rural Infrastructure (G&RI) team emphasized the need to better understand how the District Water and Sanitation Teams (DWSTs) made water-related decisions within Ghana's Northern District governments. We wanted to explore the sector to determine how our team might add value; we elected to place a short-term volunteer, Kaitlynn Livingstone, with a DWST to generate greater understanding.

I was leading the district selection process for Kaitlynn's placement and was strongly considering a district where several past G&RI staff had worked, although none of our current staff had worked there before. I went to visit the district and tried to assess its viability for the placement through a few in-person conversations with district officers.

Ultimately, I gave the green light to send Kaitlynn to that district, but realized halfway through Kaitlynn's placement that the district environment was not appropriate for building our understanding of DWSTs. As such, Kaitlynn was not able to explore the in-depth questions she had been asked to, and she and I had to do some fast thinking to turn the situation around.

Where did I go wrong? My failure was in not recognizing red flags during the viability assessment due to my own confirmation bias. District capacity is hard to predict. As a result, when a team has a long-standing relationship with a particular district, there is an inclination to continue working there. This district had previously produced successful placements connected to the water sector; however, some of the key people and projects that created this enabling environment had moved on, and I did not examine the current situation with as critical an eye as needed.

> During a time of high staff turnover, there was a breakdown in institutional knowledge management within our team.

I also failed, however, in not effectively capturing knowledge about the district. During a time of high staff turnover, there was a breakdown in institutional knowledge management within our team. While past G&RI team members may have recognized the unsuitability of the particular district for meeting the placement's objectives, new staff did not understand the district's staffing and funding challenges. I also neglected to consult key partners, both internal and external to government, to solicit their recommendations on district selection. Even though I knew the information was out there, I failed to leverage it properly.

Through this failure, our team now recognizes that districts and communities are dynamic and change with time, and that the process by which we select where to work must reflect this. Moreover, our team needs to discover ways of "remembering" institutional knowledge built up over time, even through periods of staff turnover.

After recognizing my failure, Kaitlynn and I restructured her placement. She would spent time in two other districts to produce a comparative report on DWST functionality; the report was later passed on and used by other actors in the water sector. It was a remarkable turnaround given the situation, but it still leaves a lot of questions unanswered–particularly the questions originally posed for Kaitlynn to answer. **F**

Failure in Leadership Development

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Student chapters make up a vibrant and important part of Engineers Without Borders Canada, but maintaining a successful and sustainable chapter is no small feat. After two years in the Co-President role, I have learned that the most important contributing factor to chapter sustainability is leadership development. For the Queen's chapter, one of the most effective but challenging initiatives in this area has been our director program.

The director program involves a fairly formal application, interview, and hiring process to assign specific and manageable roles to new members. This gives new members a sense of responsibility, and creates a system by which people are held accountable to get stuff done. In 2009, when the chapter was forming, the director program was in its infancy, and our executive team hired 12 directors.

Going into our first year as an official chapter in fall of 2010, we had a relatively large executive team and a very strong pool of applicants for director positions. After much deliberation we made the decision to hire 21 new directors. This was an exciting but somewhat risky move as it nearly doubled the size of the program. We believed, however, that the 21 roles were well defined and we had the capacity to provide each director with support from a member of the executive team.

As the new school year started in fall 2011, I reflected on these failures, and took steps to ensure that there was direct accountability and support for each director hired. I also tried to be more

Student chapters make up a vibrant and important part of Engineers Without Borders Canada, but maintaining a successful and sustainable chapter is no small feat.

critical during the interview and selection process to ensure we had the right people in the right roles. We continue to have a large director base – 23 this year – but so far, what we learned from last year about supporting these leaders has helped us to improve the program. **F**

The growing director program saw both successes and failures. The failures were evident by spring 2011, when two of the hired directors pulled out of their roles. In one case, the director was working with a large and very motivated team but rarely showed up for meetings or chapter events. He had not been involved with the chapter prior to taking on the role, and we discovered that his understanding of the role did not match that of the team, or of the chapter as a whole. We had failed to effectively communicate our programs and match the right person with the right role.

In the other case, the director initially remained enthusiastic, but lacked clear focus in her role. She also received support from several executive members, which meant she did not have one person who was accountable to her. I believe this lack of a single mentor was the source of the problem. It was ineffective and inefficient to have multiple executive team members supporting one director. Efforts should have been made earlier in the year to define her role, and provide effective support.

Failures in French

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One of the biggest moments for EWB at our 10th Anniversary Conference was the unveiling of our 2010 Failure Report. Having produced the reports twice before, we knew that our third edition would put EWB on the map.

Unable to make it to most of the conference in the days leading up to the unveiling, I was excited to finally be jumping in and witnessing this huge event. With over 800 people in the room, aid thinkers like Scott Gilmore, and Charity Ngoma, a partner of ours from PROFIT Zambia, shared their own reflections of personal failures. We all knew this exercise, while risky, would benefit our entire organization, and hopefully the sector as a whole.

Towards the end of the event, with great excitement, we threw open a dozen boxes filled with 1000 Failure Reports. The rush to get the reports to print not only explained my absence in the days beforehand, but also explained why the reports themselves were still warm.

After just a few minutes, I was approached by an EWBer from a francophone chapter, fraught with displeasure at what she had immediately spotted on the cover. The report was titled 'Rapport sus les échecs' instead of the agreed upon 'Rapport d'échec.' A poor translation of the title had been printed on 200 reports.

I could jump into the details of the extreme circumstances of the timelines required to produce this report, or the new processes we attempted to cut down time on editing and translation, or even about how we hired contracted typesetters for the first time in years, but unfortunately these are merely symptoms of our organization's broader failure to fully embrace and appreciate the bilingualism of members and donors across the country.

This is one I take quite personally, having supported or performed the logistics to get our last five annual reports to print. Meanwhile, our francophone members – despite being constantly supplied with materials that contain typos or poor translations – focus on the cause while they optimistically hope that EWB will get its act together.

While constantly aware of issues with translation within our communications, we balance this with dozens of other priorities, and at the end of the day don't add any additional value to this important element. This produced a clear learning for me that of the things we manage poorly, none are responsible for the erosion of trust as much as our failure to properly communicate to and for our French members and stakeholders.

Many positive outcomes have risen from this failure. A distributed translation team has emerged stronger than ever, with dozens of volunteers across the country working to produce bilingual communications and materials with a process of accountability, professionalism, and accuracy and have provided tremendous value to the organization.

All that's left is a commitment from the staff responsible for communications at EWB, to not only better accommodate and produce materials for francophone audiences, but also to ensure quality standards that don't leave our membership hopefully optimistic, but rather satisfied and proud. **F**

Protecting Innovation in a Social Enterprise

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In 2009, EWB provided seed funding to the idea of Rent-to-Own Ltd. with a $20,000 grant. My dream came to life – one of starting a venture in rural Zambia that used tailored financing, personalized training, and onsite delivery to get equipment to the entrepreneurial farmers who need it most.

This funding allowed me to prove the concept worked. I discovered that there were at least 10,000 small farmers and businesses that could benefit from the service. Each piece of equipment distributed to Rent-to-Own customers would increase the productivity, and thus profitability, of their farms.

After six months of testing I had a decision to make: should I keep Rent-to-Own as a non-profit organisation, or register it as a business? My past experience had shown NGOs didn't always react to what the beneficiaries wanted, but for-profits had to. This led me to believe for-profits were more efficient, and overall more effective, than NGOs – and I registered

Rent-to-Own as a limited liability company in Zambia.

This action put me in a tough spot. I was stuck between the for-profit and the non-profit worlds. The purpose of Rent-to-Own is to improve the plight of communities in the most remote corners of Africa. It's seen by the for-profit world as too big of a risk; meanwhile, the non-profit world doesn't have the mechanisms for donating to for-profit companies.

My dream came to life – one of starting a venture in rural Zambia that used tailored financing, personalized training, and onsite delivery to get equipment to the entrepreneurial farmers who need it most.

Neither stream of money seemed to meet the needs of getting Rent-to-Own off the ground. While there is a third group of funders—known as impact investors—who try to address this problem, this type of investment has its negative drawbacks as well. It can be difficult to overcome market failures and prove new concepts with impact investments alone, and the majority of the capital I have raised through these investors must be paid back in the near future. In addition, while the timely requirements tied to this money have guided Rent-to-Own towards more profitable activities, these activities, almost by definition, have less social impact as they prioritize profit instead.

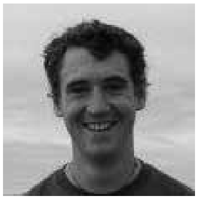
Turns out, while the idea of social enterprise is widely commended, when it comes to finding mechanisms to fund my new business, I could not find a well-suited stream of money.

Looking back, I realize that I made the switch from being a non-profit too early. It forced me to focus on the most profitable ideas and create a very lean organization, but the drawback is that I have not been able to invest in learning – especially around how to serve poorer farmers.

To help those who may find themselves in a similar position, I would suggest a more natural progression for social enterprises: once you have a sound idea with a profitable core, start an NGO to carefully test the idea; slowly spin off a for-profit that scales up and realises the impact, while the NGO continues to do research, design and training; eventually the for-profit will be able to fund all the required activities. If done carefully, this path should help keep incentives aligned on all fronts. **F**

Strengthening Traditional Leadership:

The Complexity of Community Dynamics



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Two parallel structures of leadership govern rural Malawi: official government and traditional. Despite the prevalence of traditional power structures, projects that focus on community-based management of rural waterpoints rarely consider them. EWB was interested in exploring the nature of the relationship between traditional leadership and waterpoint management to see if strengthening this leadership could improve waterpoint functionality rates. In August 2010, I began exploring this in Karonga district, Northern Malawi, in collaboration with Paramount Chief Kyungu.

Kyungu suggested we meet with Chiefs from seven villages to discuss the challenges of waterpoint functionality and the possible solutions. In this meeting of Chiefs, it emerged that they perceived their greatest challenge to be an ambiguity of ownership. Pumps had been built in their village by outsiders and, therefore, did not fall under the official jurisdiction of the traditional leaders. The Chiefs recommended the formation of village bylaws that would allow them to enforce waterpoint repairs, which was agreed upon and implemented through community discussions.

I revisited the Chiefs twice, at six months and at one year later, to determine what the impact had been, but my findings were inconclusive. Although the majority of communities had performed one or more waterpoint repairs over the course of a year, it was not clear if this had been a direct result of the bylaw creation. Furthermore, inconsistent information was a challenge – initially, Chiefs had reported that their villages had no bylaws, but during follow-ups, some villages reported having had bylaws for many years.

This highlights the true complexity of community dynamics, where obtaining accurate information is as difficult as interpreting it correctly. As an outsider, it was nearly impossible to assess what internal community dynamics were really at play. The ability to identify true successes requires robust ways of measuring change – even small change – and in addition, we must be able to understand how to interpret what those changes really mean.

The amount of time and energy resources required for these processes raises questions of whether efforts might be better spent. If we cannot know with certainty what is happening in individual cases, can we perhaps see trends emerge at a systems level by influencing the surrounding environment (i.e. government or NGO behaviour)? Is it possible to raise waterpoint functionality rates, even if we're unsure of the exact methods communities use to self-organize around repairs?

I encouraged the use of bylaws as a simple mechanism for supporting traditional leadership. The test failed to provide any real evidence of impact because the approach did not account for the complexity of community dynamics and the challenges this creates – both for implementation and interpreting impact. While traditional leadership may still hold potential to influence community waterpoint management behaviour, understanding the true dynamics at play may not be practical. Instead, the real potential for change likely lies in the community environment, either supporting or hindering the emergence of effective community waterpoint management. **F**

Communications Breakdown

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For the last two years, the Youth Engagement (YE) team has used the distributed team model to manage EWB's youth outreach activities. Instead of having one full-time staff in the office, the YE portfolio has been managed by a team of volunteers all across Canada. In addition to working collaboratively as a four-person distributed group, the YE team communicates with National Office staff and chapter members, but has few opportunities for face-to-face interactions. The YE program was the first to adopt the distributed team model – a model now used by six programs – but being the first has meant the YE distributed team has faced its share of challenges, failures, dysfunctions, and most importantly – lessons on how to move forward.

Let us go back to late August of 2010, when our 2010-2011 team was assembled and began working together. Just one week prior to the start of the school semester, we decided that our primary short-term focus would be the creation of a vision and year plan for the program.

As a result, our team's first in-person meeting in Toronto centered on intensive visioning and timelining, rather than on establishing strong relationships with National Office staff.

Our team left Toronto with a solid timeline, some exciting new directions, trust amongst team members, a strong relationship with our team manager Ian Froude, and a lot of enthusiasm for the coming year. What we lacked, however, was the personal and structural connections to the National Office that would be necessary to translate our goals into collaborative actions.

We assumed that having well-established communication structures with Ian acting as our advocate in the office would be sufficient to ensure good information flow between the distributed team and National Office. Furthermore, we assumed that our individual and collective roles as a distributed team were understood by office staff and chapters. We would quickly realize that these last two assumptions were wrong.

Our faulty assumptions led to a series of problems and disconnects between our team and the National Office, including poor dialogue, failure to get the whole team engaged, lack of external understanding of how the team functioned and delivered on objectives, and expectations for the team to operate as a National Office staff member but without the natural lines of communication afforded by sharing an office, and with each team member operating on a voluntary, part-time basis.

Our team was internally strong but struggled to get positive feedback, challenging and thought-provoking dialogue, and face-to-face communication with the National Office. This contributed to a lower morale across the group, and a lower quality of work. It wasn't difficult to spot these failures. The challenge was identifying what our team could do to improve the situation.

The most important thing we realized was that we had to stop blaming our challenges on the structure of our distributed team, the National Office, or other external factors; it was our responsibility to establish our communication needs and expectations, and to proactively share them with the relevant stakeholders within EWB. Sharing these expectations and norms was especially important because distributed teams were a new structure within EWB and thus, most National Office staff and chapter members were unfamiliar with the model.

We worked on developing clearer communication norms, both internally and externally. This did not happen overnight but rather was the result of an iterative process, where we first fixed our internal problems, and then set out to determine the best strategies to connect with National Office and other external

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stakeholders. The salient points of our approach were to:

- Figure out who has to be informed and involved in different decisions and discussions between the manager, the team lead and the other team members so that everyone feels connected.
- Prioritize creating strong relationships within the team and with external stakeholders as early as possible, so they are in place before it's time to act.
- Establish a mutually beneficial dialogue with external stakeholders through asking specific questions we want input and feedback on and have responses shared back to us.
- Clearly voice constructive criticism for processes that are ineffective or frustrating, and do so as early as possible.

Looking beyond our own team, the staff at the National Office also began taking action to improve our communications. They took further ownership over their role in making the distributed team model work better and made ongoing changes throughout the year.

This failure and learning sparked a process to improve communication at the organizational level. The National Office is currently developing a strategic structure to frame communication expectations between all the different parts of the organization. In some sense, the goal is to institutionalize the informal learning that has been happening for the last two years across distributed teams, chapters, African programs and the National Office.

As an organization with a broad, distributed, and ever-evolving network of volunteers, the exploration of non-conventional operational models led us to develop our distributed team as an innovative and effective way to spread the reach and effectiveness of EWB's work. It is extremely exciting to see the idea integrate into the organization. Even better is that, as we continue to integrate these non-conventional models in different ways, we know from our experiences with the YE team that we have so much potential to learn and improve the effectiveness of the work we do. **F**

Resource and Relationship Woes:
An Examination of Global Engineering Month 2011

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In October 2010, a group of ambitious EWB members at the University of Calgary envisioned the province's first ever "Global Engineering Month" (GEM), focused on the evolving role of engineers in society. New leaders were recruited and they jumped at opportunities to take on responsibilities – the energy was palpable!

Our plan was to take GEM beyond EWB by building a movement of diverse engineering groups. The event would be managed by volunteers and led by a leadership committee with representatives from multiple engineering student groups. We made it our number one priority to partner with other engineering organizations, faculty, and most importantly, the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists, and Geophysicists of Alberta (APEGGA). As the province's licensing body and leading professional association, it would bring unrivalled legitimacy, as well as the network and resources that GEM needed to succeed.

The task of liaising with APEGGA was given to an enthusiastic leader due to her experiences outside of EWB in a variety of high-capacity roles. This was done in line with EWB's approach of supporting new members in high-responsibility positions that offer experiential learning. Everything seemed to be going according to plan – the member reported having regular communications with APEGGA and the team was excited to have her onboard. However, in February the representative informed the team that APEGGA would not be involved. GEM was scheduled concurrently with National Engineering and Geoscience Month, and APEGGA was legitimately concerned about promoting two events at the same time.

We managed to implement all of our events through quick work by the entire team. We found local sponsors, reworked some elements of GEM and, at the end of the day, the events were co-created with engineering groups and faculty members, and together we succeeded in engaging many engineers and members of the public. However, a significant failure had occurred in our planning. EWB didn't get APEGGA onboard as a partner in the Global Engineering movement and as a result, the impact and scale of our work was lowered significantly.

I strategically chose a highly capable leader to take on the role of creating the partnership with APEGGA but, as her manager, I failed to give the support she needed to ensure she succeeded in that role. I was certain of her strengths; there was no doubt in my mind that she would succeed. Because of this, I did not put time towards supporting her and assumed that she would come to me if she had any questions about the GE concept.

A post-mortem on the 2011 GEM found three project failure paths stemming from my failure:

1. The representative working with APEGGA was new to EWB. Often, EWB places high-capacity but inexperienced people in roles that are a challenge, in order to foster development through experiential learning. While this is a great strategy for helping amazing leaders grow, it can also have big implications. In this case, she didn't have an understanding of EWB's history or the knowledge to articulate EWB's concept of "Global Engineering." I should have recognized this and provided greater leadership support, or I should have delegated the task of managing the relationship with APEGGA to a leader with a stronger background in GE. Investing in the learning and growth of leaders is important, but it must be balanced with finding the right person for the job – especially when managing relationships with important potential partners. I made the wrong choice by assuming her high capacity would translate into building strong GE relationships with minimal support.
2. When exploring the failure in communication, we found that the representative's communication to APEGGA focused too much on the title of "Global Engineering," and not on the parallels between "Global Engineering," APEGGA's objectives, and the tangible plan for our month. Too often, GE is shown as an EWB idea and as a result it can be hard to get widespread buy-in when we communicate it.
3. After GEM, the team failed to follow up with APEGGA which led to a strain in the relationship. It wasn't until June 2011 that this misunderstanding was cleared up. Managing relationships can be difficult, and it is essential for both parties to set clear expectations, foster transparent communication, and keep each other appraised of programming changes. When things are not going well, prompt and sincere engagement is essential.

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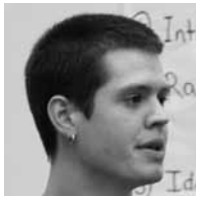
Looking forward, EWB chapters who seek to build relationships with external organizations should ensure the right people for the job are set up for success. A mix of EWB knowledge, communication skills, and a humble-yet-confident attitude are necessary components of building strong relationships. When we are planning projects, we should be aware of the balance between investing in developing new leaders and ensuring outcomes are achievable when assigning roles of any kind.

More broadly, EWB learned a lesson

about communicating with partners through this failure, and so asked Len Shrimpton, Chief Operating Officer of APEGGA, what he thought about us publishing this story publicly. This is what he had to say: "APEGGA continues to support what Engineers Without Borders stands for. The enthusiasm and energy for the profession is remarkable." **F**

Walking the Walk on Transparency



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For almost two years, the promotion of transparency has been a staple of EWB's work in donor policy influence. EWBers called on our government to sign the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). We wrote opinion pieces, engaged thousands to sign petitions, and sat down with over 40% of Canada's MPs – everything we could to draw attention to the need for improved Canadian aid transparency.

Soon, attention turned inward, and we realized we were falling short in our own transparency. To both influence other actors in the development sphere to become compliant, and to "walk the walk" in our advocacy efforts with the Government, the need for the improvement of our own transparency became clear. We committed – with minimal understanding of the endeavour – to publish data in compliance with the IATI standard.

Working closely with global aid transparency experts (organizations like *aidinfo*, *Publish What You Fund* and the *Open Aid Registry*), we formally published data in the IATI registry about our work in Malawi's water and sanitation sector just before the Busan High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness. We were proud of this feat, as well as the opportunity to role model NGO transparency at an international level.

Despite this public victory, it became apparent that EWB had more work to do to institutionalize transparency, and IATI-compliance, as a core tenant of our operating style. Knowing our existing information management systems were inconsistent and often ad-hoc, a lot had to be done to ensure we'd be able to publish data regularly - a defining element of "open data".

Our failure thus far is clear: we haven't created a sustainable process to manage information and regularly publish to the IATI registry. We failed to establish a long-term process; instead continued to rely on the spontaneous efforts of our volunteers and staff. While IATI is meant to improve aid effectiveness by making more and better information available, this is only possible when quality information is published consistently – which we have not set ourselves up to do.

Our operational culture draws heavily on the resilience of our people, rather than that of our internal processes. While our commitment to transparency is genuine, our efforts have been sporadic, short-sighted, and poorly managed.

EWB truly values openness and deeply understands the merits of transparency – yet, despite the publication of this failure report and a committed culture of learning, we've failed to build strong information management systems.

We have failed to invest enough resources to integrate these systems at EWB. As our work grows in scale and complexity, it will become more urgent to mature and place greater emphasis on building knowledge management systems.

Moving forward, it's paramount that we build a process to consistently publish to the IATI standard. As *Water for People* CEO Ned Breslin notes, "let's not stop there – let's actually push to answer the effectiveness question as well, and insist that we not only track where the money goes, but also whether it truly transformed lives – and do all this transparently." **F**

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The Development of a Strategy

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In 2008, following the recommendation of its partners, the Rural Agricultural Entrepreneurship team (*Entrepreneuriat rural agricole* - ERA) began working on building the capacity of Farmers' Organizations (*organisations paysannes* - OPs) by implementing the Family Farm Support Service (*Conseil à l'exploitation familiale* - CEF). By 2010, the team faced major obstacles in the implementation of this strategy, leading several members to devote more of their time to strengthening a group marketing service for their partner OP. We saw an investment in marketing as a new means to eventually achieving CEF objectives, and by 2011, the team investments directly related to the CEF, as opposed to marketing, were less than 20% of total investments. Finally, in September 2011, the team decided to refocus its strategy on marketing.

This decision prompted us to rearticulate our strategy and the assumptions behind it. As we reviewed our assumptions regarding marketing, it became obvious that we had based both our marketing activities, and now this change of strategy, on a set of assumptions that had not been rigorously tested. As our marketing investments grew to the point of eventually exceeding our CEF investments, the team validated certain assumptions at the level of the OP, but never verified the value of investing in this service for the producer, independently of the CEF.

We had seen an opportunity in the area of marketing, and were pursuing it, but we had left several important questions unanswered:

- What are the producer's reasons for marketing with an OP? What are the advantages?
- For the producer, what would constitute a desirable marketing system?
- Is the OP the entity best positioned for procuring this type of service?

We had seen an opportunity in the area of marketing, and were pursuing it, but we had left several important questions unanswered.

This error had three major implications for the ERA team:

- A weak synergy between the activities of each team member and the strategy
- Difficulty creating a network of partners, or positioning ourselves relative to the myriad of organizations

that are already working on the building of OP marketing capacity
- A slowing of our activities with partners, caused by the need to work on the validation of assumptions

Based on this realization, we have prioritized the research work that will allow us first to answer the questions mentioned above, and then to determine how best to position ourselves to help with marketing. What is the main lesson here? Always question our actions by evaluating the assumptions that motivate them, and react quickly when our activities diverge from those assumptions. It is imperative to redefine the underlying set of assumptions, and to achieve a certain level of confidence as to their validity, before basing a new strategy on them. **F**

Failing to Create a Broad Sense of Urgency and Understanding of Organizational Change

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January 1, 2011 marked a significant new phase in the history of Engineers Without Borders: eight weeks earlier, Parker Mitchell, my close collaborator, dear friend, co-founder and, at the time, the co-CEO of EWB, announced an impending departure from his role.

Entering our second decade with a new configuration of leadership would obviously have substantial implications on my role (not to mention my leadership instincts and the emotional reality of missing someone with whom I had shared so much over 10 years), and also on the structure of broader leadership teams within EWB.

Starting the New Year, there was a sense of tremendous possibility – that we had the credibility, proven ideas, approach, knowledge and people to exponentially grow our impact over the next decade. For 2011, we were projecting a 50% growth in financial resources and had Canada- and Africa-based teams on the cusp of system-changing impact.

At the same time, we'd been without a Vision or a clear direction for two years; we were anticipating significant leadership turnover throughout the organization; and there was a sense that we didn't have all the structures in place to drive this next stage of growth.

Coming out of our 10th Anniversary Conference in mid-January, the core staff – Africa and Canada-based – gathered for a three-day meeting to grapple with these issues.

At this meeting, we described two doomsday scenarios for the 12-month future: "Sailing an Empty Ship" and "Death by a Thousand Cuts." Both presented an EWB without the people, energy or momentum necessary to achieve the impact we sought. We also created two positive scenarios: the "EWB Black Hole" and "Let's EWB That," which described an organization with gravitational pull, which built upon its unique characteristics to continue innovating.

These scenarios created a deep sense of urgency amongst the 30 leaders at the meeting, and led to five priorities for evolution to set us up to explode into our second decade – we termed these "Refitting the Ship". The priorities were focused on strengthening our network, creating a vision and fundraising.

My failure came over the next few months. I had helped lead a process whereby our 30-person leadership team saw the need to act urgently, and to co-create these priorities. However, I failed to ensure people understood the current context of the organization, and the priorities we were seeing as a leadership team. We were embarking on a serious change

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process, and I hadn't brought everyone I needed to into the conversation.

Over the past year, this failure has resulted in losses of trust between people in EWB, burnout as leaders struggled to anticipate change, an overall slower pace, and lower sense of unified purpose. This pained quite a large number of people I respect and admire, and hurt the organization.

The major lesson is that change of this nature requires not only understanding and buy-in from the leadership team, but also from the leaders of the organization and everyone else the changes may effect. While there will inevitably be tremendous ambiguity about the steps in any change process, the broad stages and timeline of communication need to be laid out clearly for leaders in EWB to be able to contribute and engage as effectively as they are capable. **F**

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