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AUDITING A LEISURE PROGRAM FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

Although program failure is an occasional reality, program planners tend to avoid evaluating unsuccessful programs. By examining program failure through a systematic audit, future failures can be prevented and worthy programs altered for success. Both individuals and groups working with programs can benefit personally and socially when the actual causes of failure are determined. This article further identifies types of program failures, some origins of failure, and responsibility for failure assessments. A matrix illustrates determiners and determinants for consideration in a failure audit.

AUDITING A LEISURE PROGRAM FAILURE

FAILURE AVOIDANCE

In many situations, declaring a project or an idea a failure is to consign it to some dumping place of unmentionables. We may talk of "cabbages and kings" with ease, but how comfortable are people when subjects like death, dying, disease, unemployment, divorce, accident, and failure are brought up?   The American language has a way to deal with unpleasant topics: The euphemism.   Many people can say "passed away" with less discomfort than they can say "died." William Safire, writing in his column and his book, On Language, points out current

"prettifiers" in use in America. Safire even created a category of award, the Language Prettification and Avoidance of Ugly Reality Awards. Among them are "preowned cars (formerly "used cars") and "conscious parallelism" (price fixing) and the union designation which progressed from "maids" to "domestic servants" to "household technicians." (1) Another example of the art of euphemism is "strategic misrepresentaton," a strategy for not revealing information, or more plainly said, "lying."(1)

Failure does not fare well even in the creative world of euphemism. In fact, the word is rarely, if at all, mentioned. Few people would disagree that the explanation on report cards "F-Failure" evokes feelings long after report card days are over . . . dread, fear, shame, guilt, worry, over the dramatic drop from A, B, C, D, to F! There are heart-wrenching scenes in movies, such as the weary father coming home to face his family with the news that he failed to get the job, the scientist whose experiment failed, the wreckage of a failed invention (the inventor stories usually work out); and the cook's real distress as she announced "My cake failed!" Flunked! Bombed out! Really blew it! Down the drain. What's your excuse this time?

Dorothea Brande's Wake up and Live! (2) presents case studies of people who have what she calls "the will to fail." These people set up situations or obstacles to insure failure due to other causes, thus avoiding the risk involved in succeeding or being responsible for one's self. Brande shows ways for individuals to work through the block and become creators and producers. Readers of current popular literature will recognize the will to fail in its new form: fear of success. The language of success is certainly a better-selling item on the shelf than something called "Failure." Resources found in the literature about adult and continuing education programs reveal some uneasiness with the word "failure." Benefit of the doubt should be given, since writers do work to create descriptive titles, such as "The Post-Mortem Audit" (3) and "A Post-cancellation Audit" (4) describing programs that failed.

FAILURE: A REALITY WORD

A search of the literature reveals that there is limited information on failure and a definite need for more literature, more research, and more direction in dealing with failure. Susan B. Anthony once said, "failure is impossible." In reality, failure is possible, as the failure to pass the ERA bill dramatically illustrates. ERA did not necessarily fail in heightening awareness of issues, but the bill failed to pass. In this and other instances, how one person or the group handles failure, what is learned from failure, and what is done as a consequence of initial failure say more about the issue of failure than any euphemism ever will. "Failure" is a reality word that we can use and will use to develop a case for the idea that by being prepared for possible failure, a person can work from a position of strength and confidence. One of the first things skiers learn is how to fall. Then they are taught how to get up. Knowing these two things makes an important contribution to the skier's enjoyment, safety, and skill on the slopes. Perhaps if programmers and teachers, planners and leaders are taught how to fall and how to get up . . . how to fail and how to

recover from failure . . . the associations and implications of failure can be manageable and even inspiring.

Does anyone keep a "failure file?" As programmers and planners we file our records . . . the planning steps, the budget that balanced, the activity that clicked, the idea that sparked more ideas . . . . It is good to have a file of successful programs and plans. Where would our organizaton and our mission be without successes? In the press of working on programs, implementing courses, meeting deadlines, and continuing our own education, do program planners have time set aside to do an assessment of programs that do not "go?" After the evaluation of a successful program, or a program that was implemented so that there was an evaluation which revealed its success or failure or some weaknesses, the program staff has a point at which to begin assessment. A program that never takes place is somewhat harder to assess.

A LEISURE PROGRAM FAILURE

As part of a course on programming, planners were interviewed about programs they had offered. In one interview the program discussed was one that had not been implemented. The sponsors were considering it again. The program was a camp for older adults at Mikell Conference Center, Toccoa, Georgia, and it featured discussion groups, topic presentations, arts and crafts, health and fitness sessions, all options, as well as leisure time, an excursion, good food, and reasonable rates. The original camp and the second one were planned for, and a late fall date was the only one available in the conference center's annual schedule for retreats and conferences. A needs assessment was conducted for interest in topics and activities, referred length of camp, preferred time of year, barriers to participation, transportation needs, as well as demographic information about the responders. The camp was placed on the calendar, and planning was underway. The financial risk was low for printing costs, postage, art supplies, craft materials, and planning. The presenters for the sessions were to be volunteers who would be reimbursed for expenses, so no fees had to be guaranteed.(5)

Needs assessments showed interests in many topics and activities, including those which had been offered at the first camp. Answers to questions on price, length of camp, time of year, and interest in coming to a camp for older adults were positive. Preferences for earlier fall dates or spring dates were noted, but the late fall date was represented in responses to questionnaire choices. When the camp was announced, people asked about the camp and wrote for registration forms and information. The group leaders prepared to go to camp. Then only two people registered; they were disappointed and frustrated when they were told the camp had to be cancelled . . . . So were the planners and program leaders.

Immediately an evaluation questionnaire was prepared to send to the people who had requested information but had not registered, another form for the two who did register, and a third form for the conference center's parish representatives who had presented information about the camp to groups in different towns.

Information came in from the first two sources, the people who requested information but did not register and the two people who did register. There were contradictions to some of the needs assessment information; not about programs, but about time, length, and age grouping for the camp, among other things, and some contradictions were from people who had completed the original needs assessment. The conference center's parish representatives' responses gave specific reasons, problems, ideas and suggestions about concepts, marketing, and planning which proved helpful.

EXAMINING PROGRAM FAILURE

To find out more about what happens and what to do when a program fails, the program leader had turned to the library, but found little about failed programs. Thanks to Sork's examination of program failure (3), Smith's failed program and Lacy and Smith's analysis of program failure revised to become a successful program, (6) planners discovered they were not alone in asking how, why and particularly what can be done about it.

Sork purports that aside from the unpopularity of admitting failure, ". . . the lack of post-mortem studies may be due to absence of a systematic process for performing such analyses."(3) Program failures, according to Sork, share the essential characteristics that organizational resources are expended on the program, but the planned outcome is not realized. His category Type I Failures are programs that are partially planned but are terminated before implementation. Type II Failures are programs planned, offered, and publicized, but which do not attract a sufficient number of participants, resulting in cancellation. Type III Failures are programs planned, completed, publicized, and enrolled in so that the program is offered. The failure here may be more complicated to identify, but the key to identifying Type III Failures is "   that no consideration is given to offering the program again . .   " (3)

The camp program failure had an identity . . . a Type II Failure . . and there was some consolation in knowing that other adult educators were concerned with program failures. Planners were disappointed. They knew they had a good program to offer, they knew there were risks involved, but they were stopped short. Guided by Sork's suggestions for the post-mortem audit and his questions for programmers, the people involved could give answers to some of the questions planners were asking themselves and also questions interested friends were asking. The original questions were:

> 1.   What is the dollar value of personnel time devoted to this activity?
>
> 2.   About how much money (other than for personnel) was expended for this activity?
>
> 3.   What event(s) initiated our involvement with this activity?

4.   Why was this activity judged to be related to our goal?

5.   What event or evidence led to this activity being judged a failure? (or why was this activity judged a failure?)

6.   What are the consequences associated with this failure?

7.   What could have been done to avoid this failure?

8.   What should be done to avoid future failures like this? (3)

The program leaders for the camp lived in three different towns, some distance apart, and as volunteer presenters, they did not have a regular meeting time and place. The original questions were good for discussion, but they were modified for sending to the program leaders. A letter thanked the leaders for their input and planning, and it explained that the post-cancellation audit was not a fault-finding exercise, but a means for examining what we did and did not do, what could be done differently, and what should be kept the same. "It will help planners look at the camp from the volunteer leaders' point of reference . . . ." The questions for program leaders were:

1.   How much time did you spend in preparation for your program for camp? (hours   ).

2.   How much money (other than your volunteer hours' investment) was expended on this activity? What expenses did you have? (materials, copying, travel, telephone, other).

3.   What events initiated your and our involvement with this activity and camp?

4.   How do you see the camp as relative to the goals of the Conference Center?

5.   What do you see as consequences of this camp being cancelled?

6.   What do you think could have been done to avoid cancellation of the camp?

7.   What do you think could be done differently in the concept, planning, and marketing of the camp?

8.   Your additional comments and suggestions:

No information was returned by the program presenters. One person

sketched in some answers and meant to get back to it later, but other work was pressing, so the answers were not completed or returned. Another program leader did not think it would have made a difference, since the camp was cancelled. This person had been particularly disappointed when the camp did not make, as she had an investment of creativity, time, and effort in planning and designing the art and craft activities for the camp. Not wanting to dwell on disappointment is a common individual response to failure. The other program leaders wanted to get on with their work and said that if another camp were planned, they would be glad to be on the program. They did not respond to the specific questions. The director of the camp responded verbally, so we were able to discuss the failed camp. He reviewed a copy of the report on the other questionnaires and agreed that the information would be helpful in planning future camps for adults and older adults. These people involved with the camp were all assuring each other that it was a good idea, that there was value and purpose in the camp, that sometimes things do not work out, that these things happen, and that, after all, "we're O.K." The audit was incomplete, not only from an institutional viewpoint, but also from a personal response and reaction point of the people most involved.

There had been some indications about the possibility of failure of the camp to make, but some things could not be changed or fixed once certain points were reached in the process. Even knowing that failure was possible, planners were disappointed that the project failed. But, consolation: the week before the scheduled camp the weather was beautiful fall weather, moderate temperatures, sunny, pleasant days and cool evenings. The weather during the week following the camp date was agreeable, also. But the three days that had been scheduled for the camp were bitterly cold, rainy, and grey, conditions which would not have affected the indoor program and activities, but which would have limited outdoor walking and the older adults' enjoyment. Cold weather had been one of the stated concerns of some of the non-registrants for camp, and late cancellations could have occurred even in a fully registered camp. This was not much consolation, except that the older adults were spared any discomfort. Rationalization, maybe?

WORKING THROUGH A FAILURE

As planners worked with the questionnaires, the replies, the sorting of whys and wherefores, they felt better for making the effort. They _experienced_ what program planners can do after a failed program, what Sork was working toward in his suggestions to planners. Using failure constructively for program planning was changing the let-down-after-failure response. Program planners do need to work through program failure, to analyze the failure, to immediately look at what happened, to be involved together in this analysis, and to arrive at a positive completion of their work. "The opera isn't over 'till the fat lady sings," as the saying goes; "the failed program is not over until the failure is worked through" maybe not such a colorful idea, but it has its merit. The effort necessary to make a post-mortem audit, a post-cancellation audit, or simpler, a post-failure audit is valuable to the group and to the individual. Learning how the individual and the group respond to failure, the programmer and the administrator can

utilize the audit to achieve successful programs, and as important, even more important, have confident programmers.

IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRAM FAILURE FOR INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

Findings from research in psychology are helpful in understanding how individuals and groups respond to failure. Such understandings are essential to the maintenance of a healthy self-image for adult educators and leisure educators whose work and programs are vulnerable to failure. Freud believed that one of the primary means of responding to failure was through the employment of defense mechanisms, the "modes of adjustment chosen by the ego such that libidinal impulses can be discharged with the least amount of anxiety."(7) The defense mechanism is a particular method of coping with one's environment, with unsatisfied needs, conflict, anxiety, and/or frustrations. A failure may produce some or all of these conditions.

When there is a failure to meet an ego ideal, such as the nonsuccess of a program, self-esteem is threatened, leading to anxiety. The individual seeks relief through self-defense or anger, withdrawal or denial, by fear of increased anxiety, or by autistic restructuring, such as distortion or rationalization of facts. "Basically, fear of failure describe the anxiety that is felt about the feeling of failure, not objective failure itself."(8)

As individuals and groups respond to the failure, they exhibit tendencies to internalize the failure through guilt and loss of self-esteem. The outcomes are the stifling of creativity and setting of unrealistic and inappropriate goals. The group tends to misdirect its attention toward reducing the group embarrassment rather than to attaining future success, setting lower goals or unattainably high goals to offset feelings of failure.

Following an unsuccessful program, individuals are likely to set lower goals and be apprehensive about achievement-demanding activities of the group or the job. They may begin to exhibit signs of burnout after a series of unsuccessful programs. Burnout is characterized by Zahn (9) as distancing of oneself from others, distrust or dislike replacing friendly interest, finding more joy in other areas of life than work, feeling trapped, overreaction to events, and cynicism. Physiological reactions to burnout are exhaustion and reliance on crutches such as alcohol, smoking, increased television viewing, overeating, and increased coffee drinking.

Positive Action After Failure

A thorough evaluation and audit are positive and constructive action to take after a program failure. Evaluation helps to externalize feelings of failure and guilt by properly identifying the causes of program failure. The audit helps break the cycle of failure by analyzing the roots of program failure and allowing the individuals or groups to improve or adjust future program preparations. They can work

through the frustrations, anxieties, and embarrassment common to individuals and groups involved in program failure. A thorough evaluation can be used to move from subjective feelings to objective corrections in program concept, design, planning, and implementation.

ORIGINS OF PROBLEMS

As a program is designed and carefully and laborious steps are taken to bring it into being, the use of a chart of steps, a timetable, planning model, or weekly/daily schedule will show the planners where they are in the progression. Some excellent models and suggestions are available in books and articles, and whether one of these schemes is utilized or the planners' own design is preferred, keeping records on a planning model and calendar will show if deadlines are being met, if things are being done on schedule.

Particular attention to detail is important. At the needs assessment stage the needs of potential clients or students are identified. " . . . so that we may serve them better, and through them, better meet the learning needs of our collective society."(10) A failure point can occur at the needs assessment stage of planning if the questionnaire is not relevant to the information needed for content planning or scheduling of programs. "The time to worry about implementation (of the information) is at the beginning rather than at the end of the data collection."(10) Cross discusses four types of needs assessment errors: relativity, interpretation, lumping, and consideration of the small picture. "In sum, my assessment of the state of the art (of needs assessments) is that so far needs assessments are batting about one of three in making good use of data collection."(10)

At each succeeding stage of program planning there are potential failure points. Being alert to sensitive spots in the schedule, a planner can identify problems at completed states, and proceed or not proceed according to the indications. After needs assessment come definition of program objectives, identification of clientele, program content, staffing, budget and financial planning, program marketing, program implementation, and program evaluation.

Programs that fail in the early stages of planning are usually cancelled or never announced, depending on how far the planners progressed before making the decision to terminate. Programs completed through the implementaton stage may or may not be successful for a number of reasons. Sometimes the evaluation of programs by the participants reveal the weaknesses or failures in the progrm. Sometimes they do not. Responders can answer every question truthfully and still not tell you that the program failed; in fact, they may not know that it failed, but they may know that they did not get much from it. Holt and Courtenay (11) argue that most often success cannot be determined without an impact evaluation, that is, an assessment after some appropriate time lapse following the program.

Some suggestions for origins of failure, given by experienced programmers follow: 1) Overuse of traditional methods of presentaton (lectures, charts, etc.) or overuse of innovative methods which do not

serve the needs of the program or the participants, resulting in failure for a fully-booked program. 2) Changing the time of meetings or of scheduled events from those announced in the agenda is annoying and also may cause some participants to miss what to them is an important part of the program. Deleting parts of the program undermines the strength and credibility of the program, so unless there is real need for change, or an emergency, do not court failure arbitrarily. 3) Sessions that do not start on time or that go over time can speed the program toward failure. 4) Not allowing sufficient time for breaks or scheduling badly timed breaks may lead some articipants to skip a session or escape for a while. 5) Over-regimentation can quickly stifle enthusiasm and involvement, and of course generate thoughts of escape. 6) Inappropriate pricing can affect participation when potential students perceive programs to be either over or underpriced. 7) Environmental aspects space, temperature, light, color, comfort affect communication. 8) "Others", as the questionnaires usually add, can come from your own experiences at conferences and courses and from talking with programmers or participants. Keeping our own experiences in mind when planning for other people may alert us to possible danger signals in conference planning.

There are even disaster stories to recall, and sometimes an "act of God" has caused program failure. Everything from blizzards and ice storms, transportation strikes, layoffs, bomb threats, floods, droughts, power failures, flu epidemics, and budget cuts (ours and theirs) have contributed to program failure at different stages of planning and implementation. Even if the cause is external, and the planners are helpless to fix it, there are frustrations and washed-out feelings in reaction to the unexpected failure.

Any discussion of program failure generates at least two lines of questioning. First, what is meant by failure and, next, who determines such? The following matrix proposed by Mahler* provides a scheme for considering both sets of questions:

* T. W. Mahler served as Director of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education, University of Georgia, Athens, 1967-1983.

Program Failure: Determiners & Determinants*

Determinants	Determiners			
	Participants	Planners	Sponsors	Community
Financial	Program over-priced	Misbudgeted - Ended up in the red	Earmarked support inappropriately	Return on tax dollars not justified
Cognitive	Performance on pre and post written tests showed no improvement	Did not locate content specialists	Misrepresented issues to planners	No indication of community impact resulting from program
Performance	No measurable change of on-the-job behavior	No sessions prepared to discuss "learning"	See no evidence of positive change in their agencies	Workers not hired into new industries after programs
Affective	Evaluations reveal limited opportunities for social exchange at program	Poorly managed planning meetings generate ill-feelings & confusion	Linkages between sponsors and participants never established. Sponsors go "uncredited" for their contributions	Community is not aware of program's existence
Marketing	Received program announcement 2 days before the program	Didn't conduct a needs assessment. Inadequate description of concept of program	Identified the wrong segment of their organization for the program. Concerned with promotion, instead of marketing	Had four other important events the same evening
Philosophical/ Conceptual	Have not examined own values and needs in light of program topic and event	Did not have clear concept of why the program is being done	Concerned with facilitating conference, they did not keep focus on philosophy of the organization	Have not thought much about the topic and do not identify with the issues

*The examples provided by Holt and Downs (1984) in the matrix are in no way comprehensive illustrations of failure for each category. They are only intended to provide exemplification for each type.

KNOWING WHAT AND WHY: PHILOSOPHY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Professional planners and educators need to know and be able to state what they are doing, why they decided to do this, and how this project was started. If planners do not know these things, they might be lucky and have a successful program anyway. Chances are, if they do not know what their concept, rationale, and philosophy are, they will have the opportunity to use the questions from a failure audit to find out. Sharing responsibility from the beginning to end, the program planners and participants make a team. Asking what the adult participant wants to know, how best to present the information, what type program is suitable, and when to schedule it brings discussion full circle to origins and to philosophy. Maxcy writes:

> A personal philosophy of adult education will profit the adult educator in three different ways. First, philosophy helps the instructor of adults by cultivating the perception of the finer-grained characteristics of human relationships. Philosophy sensitizes teachers to the interactions between instructor and adult learner - between learner and subject matter and between subject matter and the world at large. Second, philosophy may aid in the making of judgments or choices. Beset by competing values, it is important for the adult educator to be able to separate what is worthwhile from what is trivial in education. Third, a philosophic attitude benefits adult educators by yielding a more studied understanding of how their work relates to community, society, and culture.(12)

At this point in analyzing the origins of failure, if the reader is weighed down with the burden of responsibility, take heart. There is more to come. In an article titled, "Facing the Realities: Some Conference Planning Principles," Halverson (13) is so bold as to suggest the following perspectives in program planning:

> Failure must be accepted from the start. This reality relates to the issue of perspective in conference planning. Restated, it says that for many, many reasons, this conference will not change much behavior . .   To begin, a short-term experience (which conferences typically are) seldom produce long-term effects. For one thing, to establish the habit of a changed behavior takes time, requiring considerable repetition of that behavior. Such becomes essential to gaining facility such as comfort, security, and openness with respect to the changed behavior. Pine and Horne (1969) relate that learning is an evolutionary processes not a revolutionary one .   . For these reasons, conferences often fail to have significant long-term effects on an individual. Failure is also a result of planning and execution . .   But an additional factor should be remembered. The participant has

responsibilities, too. As noted by Pine and Horne (1969), perception and behavior result more from human meaning and perceiving than from any focus exerted on the individual . . . . Therefore, much of the reason for the conference failure less in the reality that those planning have much less than complete control of (or responsibility for) the conference situation (p. 47).

Halverson's perspective is useful, not as an excuse for failure or as an attempt to escape one's responsibility for a failure, but because it points to the reality of program failure as an ordinary element of the adult education programming experience. To abuse the perspective as an excuse or escape would only hinder effective evaluation and would tend to perpetuate program failure. Facing the reality of program failure is helpful in externalizing feelings of failure. Involving everyone connected with the program planners, presenters, participants, and sponsors in the sorting out of a failure is recommended. The failure audit can be a positive process for people and for programs.

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