



engineers without borders  
ingénieurs sans frontières  
Canada

# 2010 FAILURE REPORT

Learning from our mistakes

**FR**



Our Values:

**DREAM BIG**  
& work hard

We strive to make the impossible possible through a combination of imagination, hard work, innovation, passion and a willingness to take risks. It is this determination that allowed EWB to publicly state at our conference in 2004 that we wished to see an end to tied aid by the end of the decade. It was the perseverance of our leaders that collected signatures and talked to Canadians about this relatively unknown issue, and it was our 2008 national conference when thousands of people in Montreal symbolically untied Africa. Later that year Canada announced that it would untie all foreign aid spending.



Photo Paul Blondé/EWB

“Live and learn” is a familiar saying, but its importance stems largely from what goes unmentioned: failure. In fact, the primary use of this saying is to acknowledge that everyone makes mistakes and encounters failure. The important thing is to learn and improve from these experiences.

Indeed, learning and failing are both lifelong experiences. But whereas most institutions and individuals strive to be continuous learners, they strive equally hard to avoid failure and rarely acknowledge when it occurs. This approach is wrong and problematic. The lessons learned from failure and mistakes are often the most important, and they commonly have relevance and value to others. This is particularly true in the complex arena of international development, where problems do not have a single or clear solution, and where there are so many potential risks and challenges.

With the 3rd Edition of its Failure Report, Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada continues its bold leadership on this practice, by highlighting several mistakes and failures made throughout the year and analyzing how they have learned and improved. EWB Canada is doing incredible work in Canada and on the ground in Africa through the joint power of its staff, volunteers, and chapter members. But with a mission of tackling the roots cause of poverty and achieving catalytic or systemic change, mistakes and occasional failure are unavoidable. Some of the stories in this report reflect a failure of insight or of un-

derstanding how to work in a foreign land, while several others reflect organizational or project management mistakes. In all cases, it is impressive that individuals are publicly acknowledging failure and in many cases confessing to individual blame for mistakes so that others can learn.

These stories have significant value for other EWB staff and volunteers, as well as similar institutions and individuals working on development around the world. 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 we are looking to serve.

“...Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada continues its bold leadership on this practice, by highlighting several mistakes and failures made throughout the year and analyzing how they have learned and improved.”



**WILLIAM H. GATES SR.**

Co-Chair,  
Bill & Melinda Gates  
Foundation

*United States of  
America*



Our Values:

address

**ROOT CAUSES**  
for impact

We start by clearly defining the impact that we want to help bring about, and then think through the complexity of social change so that our actions target root causes. Owen Scott and our Access to Water Team performed such evaluations when they focused their attention on the 40% of water points across rural Malawi that were non-functional. What they found was a broken system contributing to the severe lack of water, not a broken seal on a pump. Together with Malawi's districts, EWB is bringing data to the decision making process to help inform where new wells are drilled and where others are simply rehabilitated at a much lower cost.



## ABOUT EWB

**E**ngineers Without Borders Canada is movement of engineers driven to create meaningful and lasting opportunities for Africans by tackling the root causes of why poverty persists. EWB envisions a world where the next generation of Africans will have the same opportunities as Canadians today.

**IN AFRICA**, EWB works in the agriculture, rural infrastructure, and water and sanitation sectors to build the capacity for bottom-up innovation in African organizations, which allows these institutions to prototype, pilot and scale successful programs.

**IN CANADA** over 2,000 active volunteers and 40,000 members at 35 chapters country-wide work to on three key areas: drive changes in three key areas: Advocating for improved Canadian policies towards Africa, Helping Engineering Profession serve global society, and engaging Canadians to connect and contribute to Africa.

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*Published January 2011, Toronto, Canada*

# THE 2010 FAILURE REPORT



**I**t started small. A simple idea made real with the courage to take action. No permission was given at first, but the value it demonstrated, demanded it. It has grown from bottom up, gaining support and taking on improvements over time. And it's still evolving. Tangibly, the EWB Failure Report is a collection of stories. Fundamentally, it is an example of the process of innovation and learning we would like to see across international development.

## Welcome to the 2010 Failure Report

This year we share with you nine stories from across Engineers Without Borders (EWB) – from African Programs, Canadian Programs, and management.

We considered introducing this report by offering themes that could provide a direction for learning. There are important ones: the allure of simple solutions that come at the cost of addressing root issues; the need to be patient and ready to change; and building our internal capacity required to manage the complexity of our work at multiple levels.

But we'll leave that for you to think about. Instead, let's start by remembering the very foundation of this report; key values that have underpinned EWB's progress in the last ten years. That is, to be effective change agents, we need to remain humble and

continuously learn, commit ourselves to self-reflection, be open about our mistakes, and have the courage to take action, especially after failure. We also need to take individual responsibility for creating a culture in which failure is accepted and celebrated. It's the only way we can progress, innovate and learn. The contributors to this report have demonstrated this and we hope that the stories serve as a reminder for each of us to do the same, not just once a year, but every day.

With that in mind, we hope that you will do two things when reading this report:

First, ask yourself: How am I going to apply these lessons? If you are in EWB: what does this mean for me at my chapter? In Ghana? At my workplace? If you are creating change elsewhere: How can I apply these lessons, in my organization, in my context? What is relevant or similar to situations I've faced?

Second is to go back and read the 2008 and 2009 reports. Did we learn from them, or are we making the same mistakes again? If so, why and what needs to change? What about in your work, as you reflect on the past: Are you making the same mistakes again?

We close this report with a special contribution from Ian Smillie, author and lifelong change agent. He shares a reflection from his experiences decades ago, reminding us that not only do we have ten years of learning to support us, there are in fact, decades of learning out there. Our challenge for the future will be to remain committed to learning as we take action. As Ian likes to say: "If we knew how to end poverty, we would have done it a long time ago."

Keep Doing It For Dorothy.

*The 2010 Failure Report Team, Ben, Erica, Wayne, Jon, Ka-Hay*

We learn by being open – open to new ideas from anywhere and anyone, and open about our mistakes. It starts with Annual General Meetings that run late into the night at which members hold the board and leadership accountable, and extends to our staff and volunteers openly sharing and reflecting on their mistakes in their work. This humbleness, paired with a commitment to ask, grow and innovate, drives a humble entrepreneurship that is unmatched.

Our Values:  
strive for  
**HUMILITY**



# NEAR TERM SUCCESS, LONG TERM FAILURE



## OWEN SCOTT

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African  
Programs Staff  
Water and  
Sanitation  
*Malawi*

Six months into my placement I started working part-time with Machinga district, following up on work that several of my colleagues had started there. They had been assisting the district with conducting a survey of rural water infrastructure. The purpose of the survey was to help identify areas of high and low service, in order to improve planning for new infrastructure, and identify non-functional infrastructure so it could be repaired.

We were proposing a new approach to updating rural water supply data, using an existing network of health department extension workers embedded in rural areas. We were very optimistic that the survey updates could be managed sustainably by the district without on-going external support. Following the initial survey, I was responsible for helping the district conduct quarterly updates.

The district had been given substantial funding from one of our NGO partners to do an initial survey and was not excited about the

idea of doing an update with their own limited operational budget. When we began discussing an information update, they immediately requested that I negotiate additional funding from our NGO partner.

At this point, I should have stepped back and assessed what really would have been necessary for sustainability.

“...the water infrastructure monitoring system in Machinga had, in effect, been proven unsustainable.”

The funding from the NGO partner would not be available forever and eventually funding would have to be provided from the district budget. I should have had this discussion with the district, and determined what, if anything, would motivate them to take ownership over the data collection process, and fund it themselves.

Instead I defined success as a “successful update of the survey”, and prioritized

the one-off activity over the long-term outcome of sustainability. In order to sustain the district’s involvement with the system, I negotiated for our NGO partner to release a small amount of funding for them, less than \$200, which they eventually did – leading directly to a successful update of the survey.

It was time for another round of data collection three months later. However, this time no NGO funding was available and my colleagues at the district were not happy when I told them this. However, they agreed to try to fund data collection on their own. A half-hearted attempt at data collection emerged, with a less than 50% complete return. Three months later, when it came time for another update, they chose



not to do data collection at all. The water infrastructure monitoring system in Machinga had, in effect, been proven unsustainable.

Upon reflection, I can think of two major failures from this story:

## 1. Prioritizing tangible activities as outcomes.

Success is hard to find sometimes in development work and can have a serious effect on how we think about it. For me, success quickly became about having the district staff collect data –it was tangible, concrete, and simple. Success wasn't about the district office valuing the program or about behavior change. This all but guaranteed that my own priorities and the actual priorities of the district would eventually become misaligned.


## 2. Using distorting financial incentives to achieve an outcome.

This is a classic pitfall in development, and one that I walked right into. Once I had an outcome in mind - data collection - it became easy to organize the NGO funding needed to make it happen. But using financial means to achieve my outcome (almost bribery in a way) quickly eroded the foundation of actual relevance that would be necessary for long-term sustainability of our program.

Since the experience in Machinga, I've been taking an almost opposite approach. These days, when we work with districts, we bring no external funding, even for the initial surveys. If districts want to work with us to help improve their planning and information management, they are responsible for first funding a full round of data collection without any assistance from us or our NGO partner. This serves as almost *a priori* proof that the work we're doing together is:

(a) actually relevant to the district (or else why would they fund it?),

(b) actually financially sustainable.

This has led to district governments being much more invested in the work we're doing together, and is sowing the seeds for sustainability much better than our old approach. 

# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE TOOLS



## IT'S ABOUT THE PROCESS



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Programs Staff  
Governance and  
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Ghana

**I**n the summer of 2010, G&RI engaged in a program with the Danish funded Local Service Delivery and Governance Program, the Northern Regional Coordinating Council, and six districts in Northern Ghana to enhance district data systems to facilitate evidence based planning and decision making processes.

Our team dedicated the summer to learning within and across the six districts to develop data management tools in collaboration with local government staff. One of these tools was a project monitoring Excel database that aligned with an Access database introduced by a development partner at the regional level. The second tool was an indicator database that gathered information across district departments.

Near the end of a four month pilot, we started to consider scale up of a data system enhancement service with the two tools as key components. The overarching hypothesis was that our system was better than any other existing data system at the local government level in Ghana.

We had opportunity to introduce our tools to districts across Ghana through a National Level driven training. During this time we were challenged by a development partner to step back and ask, is our system really the best solution for districts? It made us realize that different donors and

government agencies have been driving their own solutions to data management and crowding districts with an overwhelming number of tools such that none are actually used effectively. By pushing our own tools we were participating in the same game. Furthermore we had failed to explore the whole system in depth - what had been tried in the past, what other players in the field were doing and what


were emerging trends at national level. This was a humbling realization that made us question our approach.

We decided to shift our service to local governments and our messaging to national, regional and local government level stakeholders from “we have the tool that works” to “here is a process for developing and enhancing data systems to facilitate evidence base

“ ...By pushing our own tools we were participating in the same game. ”

decision making". An important element of this process is understanding the existing data management tools as well as the needs and the capacity at the district level. Based on this understanding the appropriate tool(s) can be selected and enhanced. Furthermore, critical to the sustainability and effectiveness of data management tools are the processes

for maintaining them and utilizing them for decision making.

Beyond a space for learning, this experience did have some adverse consequences for our team. Our approach and messaging in promoting our tool strained our relationship with a key national level partner with a consistent mandate and approach to our own. 

“

...we turned to reinventing the wheel rather than learning from and building upon what was there.

”

# CUSTOMER SERVICE



## MARK HEMSWORTH

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African Programs  
Staff  
Agriculture Value  
Chains – Rent to  
Own  
Zambia

**S**ince my EWB placement with Forest Fruits Zambia three years ago, I have learned about the realities of business in rural Zambia. Among the top challenge is access to productive equipment. In Sept 2009, I decided to pilot Rent to Own (RtO), a micro-leasing business for rural Zambia. The big idea is to work with business people looking to expand operations, but lack capital to buy new equipment.

## AN EXPERIMENT EXPANDS

A Zambian colleague and I first experimented with 4 pieces of equipment with great success. Our initial customers completed a business plan, paid commitment and rental fees on time and maintained the equipment in good condition. We expanded to 6 new districts and 35 customers by establishing an agent system where a local resident becomes a RtO agent responsible for assessing the credit worthiness of each applicant on behalf of RtO. The same agent collects the monthly payment and is paid a commission once all collections are completed. The agent model also worked well: agents were profitable, the business was covering costs, and most importantly, our clients were able to grow their farms and businesses.

## OUR MISTAKE

In May of 2010 we began working with successful owners of a small carpentry business in Mufumbwe district – 1000 km from the capital city. They had been running the business for 20 years, had demonstrated high ambition to mechanize operations and were looking to purchase a planing machine. Their business demand was high with secured government orders, raw timber supply was plentiful and three-phase power was available to run a machine. We delivered a planing machine to a happy customer in a few weeks, but it would be another 4 months before they could start using it.

“...We delivered a planing machine to a happy customer in a few weeks, but it would be another 4 months before they could start using it.”

“ The most painful part of this mistake was that our trust with our client eroded fast. To this day we are still rebuilding this trust. ”

## HERE'S IS WHERE WE FAILED

During installation, the agent incorrectly connected the machine to electricity and upon usage, one of the critical components was destroyed, rendering the machine useless. It was a massive headache: spare parts and expertise to repair it were only available in Lusaka, the customer demanded a new replacement, and I now owned a \$2000 piece of junk. But we persisted, and after four months, two attempts and \$500, the plainer is now functioning and the business is growing.

We don't expect business to go smoothly and from this experience we learned the following:

### **Need to invest in capacity**

We made an incorrect assumption that our target customers would know enough to set up and operate the equipment they needed. This now seems obvious since broken equipment is scattered across Zambia due to poor quality and poor usage/maintenance. In addition to agents, we have now hired a full time technician to install and train each customer on how to properly operate and maintain the equipment.

### **Growing one step at a time is key to preventing huge mistakes.**

Our incremental expansion allowed us to minimize the risk of wrong assumptions.

### **Long-term relationship with customers helps to align incentives, this empowers them.**

To me the most important thing is aligning incentives. When we give a customer a piece of equipment worth \$1000, and they've only paid \$150 in advance, it's easy to see how we both want to work together.

### **We need to work closely with our customers, selling them stuff isn't enough.**

Building and maintaining trust is critical to successful business relationships. The most painful part of this mistake was that our trust with our client eroded fast and furthermore is that trust with our agent was compromised. To this day we are still rebuilding this trust. **FR**



# PERSONAL FAILURES AS A CHANGE AGENT



## **BEN BEST**

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Staff  
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Ghana

“...I hope that some of these lessons will help future APS and their managers deal with some of the personal failures that are possible when working in development.”

In March of 2010 I began my placement at a District Agriculture Development Unit (DADU) within the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA). I was taking over from a colleague who transitioned out of the district two months before. My objectives were to set up and support systems that would allow the DADU to effectively and sustainably run the Agriculture as a Business Program (AAB) that my colleague had introduced over her placement, as well as to explore new initiatives focused on bettering management capacity with DADU offices.

I ran into several challenges pushing AAB towards sustainability in the DADU, most notably an extremely understaffed office when I arrived, and an appointed coordinator for the program that was often enthusiastic in conversation but failed to take action after the fact. As I explored management initiatives I would learn more about the environment I was working in and constantly

come up with what I thought were better and better ideas without committing to focused implementation on any of them. Ultimately I had too many projects on my plate, too few successes and low motivation. Finally I took on ‘gap-filling’ roles that played to my strengths with technology, taking up further time that was not directly related to my objectives but provided short term motivation.

Although there were many factors outside of my control that made my placement difficult, there are several specific mistakes that I made. My biggest mistake was getting stuck in ‘analysis paralysis’ instead of having a bias towards action. As I was learned about how the DADU operated, I could have been testing small management improvements, even if there was limited enthusiasm at first. Small wins earlier on would have increased my motivation levels and strengthened my relationships with partners. Secondly, I did not strategi-

cally use my gap-filling roles to leverage my actual goals, and was happy with merely saving district officers’ time.

While I take full responsibility for the failures outlined above I believe it is still important to share these failures and lessons learned. The first would be to narrow my focus and set up specific accountabilities. I wanted to drive a lot of change in a lot of areas but that meant too many small projects and too much work. This meant my manager couldn’t hold me accountable to deliverables as there was simply too much work to do. An overflowing schedule is a reality, so in future I must prioritize the difficult and important work instead of being content in ‘getting work done’. There will always be enough low risk work to do to fill the time but this is not what creates change. Secondly, gap-filling (especially in areas where unique value is provided) is tempting but it should also be used strategically to further the main placement objectives. I hope that some of these lessons will help future APS and their managers deal with some of the personal failures that are possible when working in development.

**FR**

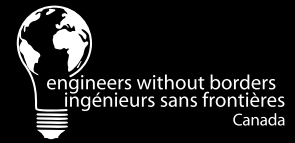
Everyday across Canada and rural Africa, EWBers are asking questions that nobody else is. From questioning data collection techniques and technologies for mapping access to water in rural Malawi, or holding our government accountable to making aid as effective as possible. EWB is constantly asking questions of itself and our colleagues to ensure that we have disproportionate impact on our stakeholders.

Photo: Duncan McNicholl/EWB

Our Values:  
ask tough  
**QUESTIONS**



# IMPROVING OUR ACT



## A LESSON IN ADVOCACY



### JAMES HAGA

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Director of  
Advocacy  
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**L**In June of 2010, with Canada hosting both the G8 and G20 Summits, EWB's advocacy team launched the ACT Campaign to advocate that the Government of Canada make our foreign aid more Accountable, Creative and Transparent (ACT).

The *raison d'être* of ACT campaign was to shift the political dialogue from the tired debate of how much money Canada should allocate towards aid to how Canada can strengthen the quality and effectiveness of existing aid resources.

ACT promoted ambitious recommendations for how Canada should improve its approach to international development. These recommendations ranged from establishing a new Independent Commission for Aid Impact (tasked with

assessing the value and effectiveness of Canada's aid investments), to the creation of a venture-focused Innovation Fund (investment fund focused on helping to scale promising development ideas).

The campaign started out well. Advocacy members across Canada were equipped with core messages and did a great job promoting ACT. They met with over 100 Members of Parliament (MP) and held over 200 MP meetings. This effort helped EWB strengthen our engagement with Canada's political representatives and built a network of support for ACT from MPs across the country.

We were happy with this progress, but we failed in the next step. After we created a great broad-based campaign

that generated widespread political support, we were too slow in turning that general support for our principles into tangible and specific action that could be practically implemented.

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....But support for a set of principles alone does not create change in the system; we needed to follow-up on this general support with a far more focused “ask.”

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“ ... we were too slow in turning that general support for our principles into tangible and specific action. ”

## WHAT HAPPENED IN MORE DETAIL

Since we were trying to influence decision makers, our first goal was to build rapport and provide a compelling case for our ideas. We did this exceptionally well by providing clear rationale behind our recommendations. We increased the development knowledge of many politicians and generated support for ACT in principle; again, this was very good. But support for a set of principles alone does not create change in the system; we needed to follow-up on this general support with a far more focused “ask.”

The campaign began with five specific recommendations which allowed us to build broad-based support. It also helped us understand which of the recommendations resonated the most politically. However, five

recommendations created a cumbersome path to policy change. Since political capital can only be applied to select areas at one time, by not focusing our weight behind one tangible recommendation, we limited the policy-change potential of the campaign. The breadth of our policy recommendations was too broad and offered an easy way out for politicians who could provide their support in principle, but could sense that our agenda was too broad to result in real changes.

## ADJUSTING OUR APPROACH

In mid-November, we started to internalize this lesson and changed our approach accordingly. We decided to build on the work of ACT and advocate that the Government of Canada sign on to the International Aid Transparency Initiative. While this doesn't mean that we've stopped engaging MPs about broader development issues – we haven't – we have begun to be far more selective in the policy change we're asking politicians to support. **FR**

# BRING EWB TO WORK



## THEORY OF MOBILIZATION



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Leader,  
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Professional  
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Programs

**I**n the last 10 years, EWB has achieved considerable success in public outreach: speaking to 1,000,000 Canadians, and reaching over 125,000 youth through presentations. Our reach into the professional community, however, has lagged far behind – 60 presentations annually, averaging 14 attendees per presentation; we were confident that we could grow this outreach considerably, and worked to create Bring EWB to Work (BETW) – a national level campaign directly targeting the professional engineering community.

**THE BETW** campaign involved three key components based on the following assumptions: that volunteers across Canada were eager to drive engagement if it was easy for them; having a time bound, unifying event would encourage greater participation; mid-July would allow for student interns to settle into their jobs and be able to have more influence within their workplace; and a web-based community of volunteers would help maintain motivation. To roll this out, we developed a standard presentation and support material for all EWB members to use and adapt to local context, designated the third week in July as

the national BETW week and launched an on-line tracking system to help manage demand across the country. A major goal was to deliver 200 presentations nationally through this mobilization strategy.

This is what we were able to achieve with BETW:

- 51 presentations delivered (25% of target).
- 103 people actively signed up on website, 75 presenters committed to deliver presentations, 28 presentations delivered.
- 68 presentations were requested through a broad email 23 were delivered, 26 had no follow up and 19 were outside our geographical reach.

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...While the total 51 presentations were on par with our previous annual numbers, the turnout for BETW was dismal.

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# FAILURE REPORT

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...We applied these lessons and achieved our targets at the next national level outreach: Solving Problems that Matter.

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## FAILURE/LESSONS

While the total 51 presentations were on par with our previous annual numbers, the turnout for BETW was dismal. One of the major reasons for this is that I did not establish a clear road-map of what this national level mobilization would look like and did not have specific enough milestones to help me gauge progress and flag concerns early. While I was able to course correct, the lack of the higher level milestones and measures would have alerted me earlier to areas that if addressed in a timely manner, could have significantly improved our numbers.

## OTHER FAILURES OR INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS WERE

**TIMING** July was a poor time for workplace engagement given vacation schedules.

**NO REGIONAL** representative This limited our follow up and personal touch required for engagement.

**NO FOLLOW UP** 75 presentations committed were never delivered. We were not diligent in ensuring follow through.

## IMPROVING ACTION

We applied these lessons and achieved our targets at the next national level outreach: Solving Problems that Matter. We developed a higher level strategy which allowed us to react quickly to what was happening during the campaign and ensure progress was on track. Additional lessons learned and applied were:

**KNOW** and work with your audience's timing: Time events for when it has the most potential to reach your target audience. Consider vacation schedules

**IDENTIFY** regional representatives – BETW didn't have regional representatives, but high personal interaction can drive up involvement.

**ENSURE** accountability –Think about appropriate ways to ensure commitments are carried out – this is where personal interaction can be valuable.

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# A FAILURE IN DISTRIBUTED INNOVATION



## JONATHAN FISHBEIN

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Canadian  
Programs

“ By the end of the fall, team members had low interest in the team and we disbanded it with little being done. ”

In the Spring of 2009, Engineers Without Borders (EWB) proposed EWB 2.0, a new model to encourage EWB members across the organisation to innovate on ideas and offer a new way of getting involved in the organization. This involved some Canadian Programs to create distributed teams – teams comprised of EWB volunteers from across the country, focused on a national program area, but independently taking action. I proposed the idea of a distributed team for EWB's Global engineering with the following model: I would work from the National Office on high level curriculum changes with university Deans and administrators, chapters would work with professors in

the classroom to implement specific curriculum changes and a separate Innovation Team would focus on identifying new projects to support our change from a different angle.

Over the summer, we defined the mandate of the GE Innovation Team as analysing the GE program and find innovative new ways to support the overall GE program objective. I opened applications to EWB members and the team was created from the best and most energetic applications. We hosted an introductory call with the team to clarify the mandate of the team and set the expectations that we should have an action plan for a project we wanted to implement by the

end of the summer. I also set the expectation that for the remaining calls that I would serve as a resource for the team rather than lead it (to encourage their ownership). The team also walked away from the call with deliverables aimed at generating ideas for a potential project. However, over the course of two more calls, we still had limited ideas in August. To ensure we could meet our original goal, I proposed an idea and tried to rally the team around it. The team decided to move forward with my idea, however over the next few months, little was done to implement it. By the end of the fall, team members had low interest in the team and we disbanded it with little being done.

# FAILURE REPORT

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My concern was the team would lose ownership if I imposed goals, and assumed that the team would ultimately choose their own specific goals.

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## THE FAILURE

The failure was in managing distributed actions. I learned the importance of clearly defining a problem and having a tangible goal to achieve. My concern was the team would lose ownership if I imposed goals, and assumed that the team would ultimately choose their own specific goals. Of course, this did not happen since lack of initial framing and moderate knowledge with the program did not set them up to do this. Also, there was no leader for this team to manage progress and monitor team health. For this, I didn't encourage a team leader to step up explicitly, and instead, assumed that one would emerge on its own.

The key lesson for me was that added structure in goals and roles does not lead to a loss of ownership in the team, especially if that structure is made explicit as the team is forming. A team leader properly supported could hold the team accountable, focus the teams actions and own the teams results. Similarly, a specific challenge can help distributed teams function better and succeed as it offers a tangible issue to focus around and measure progress against. If this team had a more focused mandate, (e.g. structuring our existing curriculum resources in a progression of classes) then it would have been easier to

focus the work of the team, check-in on the teams progress and get outputs that were immediately impactful to the Global Engineering program. In EWB's Canadian Programs, I am starting to look at each of our distributed teams and asking the specific problem this team will solve this year for EWB. 



## ERICA BARNES

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Former President  
McMaster Chapter

“...I failed to fully recognize this early in the year and did not adequately assess the individual skills, or provide appropriate support.

”


In the spring of 2009, the McMaster Chapter came together to do a visioning exercise for the 2009/10 school year. The vision was exciting and robust. However, it became clear that achieving the many goals we had set for ourselves would require a new chapter organizational structure that allowed for greater involvement by more people and designed to achieve more outcomes.

The new structure was developed by the visioning team and led to a large executive of 10 directors with specific program responsibilities reporting to the president. Under the 10 program directors were 2-3 key individuals with responsibility for specific activities. All of these individuals were invited to attend executive meetings. We shifted the focus of the weekly executive meetings to monitoring and reporting on program activities rather than planning. This left time for the executive to discuss and problem solve broader issues and generate new ideas for the chapter.

Overall, this organizational structure worked well and the chapter had a very successful year. However, we found that some programs were more successful than others in achieving their goals. Analysis and reflection showed that this structure was highly dependent on the abilities of the program directors. In particular, an ability to engage and maintain the motivation of team members appeared to be a major predictor of success. Where this did not occur, we lost the participation of the team members at both the program and executive level.

As president of the chapter, I failed to fully recognize this early in the year and did not adequately assess the individual skills, or provide appropriate support. I assumed that within this decentralized structure that these highly motivated and knowledgeable individuals had the leadership skills to fully engage their team and carry out the program activities.

### So what - Implications for the future

Having a structure in which form follows function is useful when an organization wants to achieve numerous clearly defined goals and objectives. However, decentralizing responsibility for key organizational objectives places significant responsibility on the organizational leader to have appropriate skills and support to be successful. I would recommend implementing a series of workshops that focus on identifying and assessing individual skills in program leadership. This information can then be used to tailor further learning opportunities to meet group and individual needs. In the future, it may also be useful to establish mentoring relationships between executive members as a learning tool and to ensure that this work is not only the responsibility of the president. 





# ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES



**PARKER MITCHELL  
GEORGE ROTER**

Co- CEO  
EWB Canada

“....this next year would be essential for the leaders of EWB to unify the organisation and solidify the changes that happened.

”

**O**n a nice winter day in December 2009, we set out north of Toronto for a 2-day Co-CEO offsite. Our goal was straightforward: Reflect on our progress in 2009, and have a conversation about the organization’s direction and our own priorities for 2010.

The previous 12-months involved significant change in EWB. We got rid of our outdated mission; pared back ambitious plans because of the global recession; articulated 4 outcomes areas to focus our work; had over 200 people across the organization develop a set of beliefs and values to guide our decisions and culture; and began creating a new organizational model, EWB2.0, that gave more people more responsibility to innovate and drive forward different parts of the organization. All of this while still evolving our programs and delivering impact in Canada and in Africa.

We were both pretty worn out. And we hadn’t synchronized our thoughts and ideas as much as we should have over the preceding few months, which meant being on a different page from one another on many dimensions of EWB. Further, we knew that this next year was going to be critical: All the business books we read and experts we talked with about change management suggested that this next year would be essential for the leaders of EWB to unify the organization and solidify the changes that happened. The pressure was on.

We had originally meant for this to be an offsite with our newly minted 3-person management team, but our last-minute planning meant that Brenna Donoghue (the third member of the management team) couldn’t make it. We decided the conversation couldn’t wait and that we could bring her up to speed later.

## WHAT TRANSPIRED/HAPPENED?

Coming out of our Co-CEO offsite, we developed a series of themes and priorities that we believed would be important for the organization, the national office, and the management team in 2010. These were areas of focus that we believed would facilitate the next stage of growth and maturation of EWB, and allow us to deliver stronger impact over the coming 12-months.

We brought Brenna into the conversation and then shared the themes with all EWB staff during our twice-yearly planning offsite at the end of January, asking them to help flesh out the details and what success would look like. At this point, we also decided not to bring a broader group of EWBers into the discussion – that instead these themes would merely guide the behind-the-scenes work of the EWB staff for the next year.

**BY THE END OF FEBRUARY, THESE THEMES WERE REFINED INTO THE “3-4-5”.**

## Three Organizational Priorities

- Driving a creative fundraising and resource acquisition mentality throughout the organization
- EWB2.0 continuing to develop the distributed model and improve organizational unity.
- Ensuring, at all levels, we identify more concrete goals and metrics and hold ourselves accountable to them.

## Four National Office Focus Areas

- Improving National Office staff performance, support, development, management capacity and organizational processes.
- Improving the articulation of our African programs in a sophisticated way for the rest of the sector.
- Improving the explanation of EWB for a variety of stakeholders.
- More consciously and rigorously managing and developing our leadership pipeline across the organization.

## Five Management Team Focus Area

- Fundraising.
- Human Resources bringing on management experience.
- Role modeling good management practice.
- Ensuring delivery of MyEWB2.0.
- Developing a strategic plan for Canadian Programs.

One member of the management team was made accountable for each of these areas, and overall goals, objectives and workplans were created for each one (by the management team member). Staff were brought in to work on some of these areas directly and explicitly, and others times it was more implicit. Progress on the 3-4-5 was updated at each monthly management team and office staff meeting.

# ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES



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ingénieurs sans frontières  
Canada

There are a number of lessons we take from this and implications for the future:

**1.** While we made a decision in the fall of 2009 to operate less as a Co-CEO tandem and more as a management team, we reverted to past habits when the pressure was on. This had repercussions in developing and leading the 3-4-5, as well as in other areas throughout the year.

*In 2011, we have a new organizational reality of a single CEO. George will be focusing on changing how major issues are considered and decisions made – the focus will move to a more robust management team, with the CEO as a first among equals.*

**2.** We failed to take the time to help the core leaders in EWB – staff and more broadly leaders at chapters, city networks, distributed teams, etc – go through the same reflection and planning process that we did. This meant the 3-4-5 was given to

people, rather than internalized and “felt” to be the priorities for the coming year.

*Already we have taken steps to correct this by holding a Vision Week in December 2010, and setting up significant conversations about the next year and beyond during our National Conference. This will be continued through March 2011, with the focus on deeply engaging many people in EWB in thinking about what our organizational priorities and plans should be, and what we need to do to achieve them.*

**3.** We failed to work with EWB’s managers to incorporate the 3-4-5 directly into staff member workplans and priorities. It is important to draw a direct connection between actions and plans at all levels, so that there is a broad sense of contribution and responsibility.

*We will be working on connecting each person’s plan to*

*team plans and to the broader priorities of the organization. During our monthly staff meetings, we will spend time connecting and recognizing people’s contributions to the overall organizational focus areas.*

**4.** Rigorous, disciplined process is important for ensuring focus and having honest conversations about progress.

*We will be giving a single management team member responsibility to develop and drive improved organizational processes around planning and accountability.*

**5.** There were probably too many areas of focus – this diluted resources and overall performance was lower.

*We will aim to simplify our priorities and plans this year (and for our 5-year strategic vision), even if that means de-prioritizing important areas or developing priorities and focus areas over shorter time horizons.*



Our Values:  
invest in  
**PEOPLE**

We know that true change will require a movement of socially-minded leaders. We support and invest in each other to build this movement together. During the summer of 2010, EWB worked with the planning officers and government works engineers of northern Ghana to enhance data management systems in six districts. The result of the three day training was improved evidence-based planning and decision making. EWB also invests in the next generation of leaders in Malawi with an annual leadership conference to build capacity in the water sector, and across Canada, with thousands of hours of leadership development training and opportunities each year.

Photo: Daniel Olsen/EWB.



# FAILING TO LEARN FROM FAILURE



**IAN SMILLIE**

author

Change agent

My 2009 book, *Freedom From Want; The Remarkable Story of BRAC*, started with the story of a development failure in which I was personally involved:

“ In 1972, shortly after the liberation war, I was sent by CARE to Bangladesh, ‘a thumbprint of a country in a vast continent’ as Tahmima Anam has so eloquently described it. I was to work on a self-help housing cooperative project. We provided plans, material and technical assistance to help people build their own low-cost, cyclone-resistant houses. We imported thousands of tons of cement and enough corrugated tin sheets to cover a dozen football fields. The project was massive, but it failed. The houses were constructed, but the cooperatives – which were arguably the most important component because they aimed to generate funds for longer-term agricultural development and employment – failed miserably. We had a large office in Dhaka – then known as Dacca – lots of jeeps and trucks and speed-boats, and many international staff with energy and commitment to spare. Our only problem was that we had almost no idea what we were doing.

While I was in Dhaka ordering freighters full of cement from Thailand, a tiny organization was forming on the other side of town, and in the rural areas of faraway Sylhet to the north. I recall meeting Fazle Hasan Abed at least once in 1972 or 1973, and I remember people speaking about BRAC with a kind of awe. Their attitude did not flow from anything remarkable BRAC was doing at the time – everything was remarkable in those terrible postwar years. What caught people’s attention was the fact that BRAC was a Bangladeshi development organization – something that few outsiders had ever heard of, much less conceived.

Over the years I have been privileged to return to Bangladesh many times, often to work with BRAC on a project design or an evaluation or a report. I have never visited and found the same organization twice. On each visit there is always something new – ten thousand more schools; a dairy; a university; a functional cure for tuberculosis. In 2007 BRAC’s microfinance lending topped a billion dollars. A billion. The amazing thing about all of BRAC’s achievements is that they have been accomplished in one of the most hostile climates in the world – hostile in every sense of the word: meteorologically speaking, economically and politically. And now BRAC is taking its lessons to other Asian countries and Africa.

”



The CARE housing project failed because we were in a hurry, we were overconfident, we didn't have adequate cultural or historical knowledge, and we didn't do the homework that might have told us in advance what we were going to learn the hard way. BRAC too was forced to learn – sometimes from study, sometimes from experimentation, sometimes from failure. Unlike those of us who moved on from Bangladesh to other things, however, BRAC stayed. It remembered what it learned and it applied the lessons in ways that allowed it to expand and to become what is arguably one of the most effective development organizations in the world today.

The development busi-

ness is largely uncharted territory. If we knew how to end poverty, we would have done it a long time ago. And yet the enterprise is notoriously risk-averse; donors demand results and punish failure. The development challenge is not to avoid the risk that comes with charting new paths. It is not to deny failure. It is to learn, to remember, and to apply what is being remembered. That is the difference between information – of which we have so much today – and knowledge, of which we seem to have far too little.

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...It is to learn, to remember, and to apply what is being remembered. That is the difference between information – of which we have so much today – and knowledge, of which we seem to have far too little.

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This is Dorothy Nthala. Both she and her husband Bvekelani work tirelessly on their maize crop in Tchale, Malawi in the hopes of selling the maize they grow at the market to earn an income and build a stronger future for their family. We put Dorothy first. We strive to do what she would advise us to. We help bring her voice into the rooms where she needs to be heard. We stay independent to stay true to her interests. You might be wondering why she is such an important person. Just ask any EWBer what Dorothy means to them.

Photo: Anna-Marie Silvester/EWB

Our Bottom Line: We Put **DOROTHY** First



Get the whole picture. Detailed program reports are available at:

[www.ewb.ca/publications](http://www.ewb.ca/publications)

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# 2010 FAILURE REPORT

**Learning from our mistakes**



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