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Learning from Events Mismanagement

Phil Higson

There is great value in disaster

Speaking to his son after a cataclysmic fire destroyed much of Thomas Edison's life's work, the prolific inventor famously said:

"There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew." (Clemmer, 1999: 94)

This quote on coping with failure is one of many to offer inspiration during difficult times. Indeed, any number of entrepreneurs, leaders or captains of industry say the foundation of their success was a positive attitude to failure. There can be no doubt that there is much to learn from mistakes, mishaps, failures, and disasters. In fact, it would be very bad management not to seek to do so. Whilst learning from failure is a fundamental aspect of lifelong learning, it should also be a basic tenet of good management.

Therefore, this chapter aims to do three things. First, it explores the nature of management learning within the context of learning from failure. Second, it examines the range of management disciplines, approaches, and techniques which event managers might use to help them avoid failures. Third, it addresses each of these within the context of events management failures. This chapter is thus designed to both underpin the case studies presented throughout the book, and to help inform the reader's understanding and application of the lessons to be learned.

There is an array of literature which addresses learning from failure both from individual and organizational perspectives. However much of this is not directly related to the complexity of events management, grounded as this is in a mixture of project management and service management theory. The former addresses planning, resource and delivery processes, whereas the latter considers the experiential nature of events as service 'products'. So, event failure can manifest itself in a variety of ways, from missed delivery or financial targets to the reputational costs of service delivery failure.

One of the earliest authorities on events management, Getz (2002), applied a range of theoretical frameworks to inform our understanding of failed festivals. He identified several common causes of failure, including: *“the weather; lack of corporate sponsorship; overreliance on one source of money; inadequate marketing or promotion; and lack of advance or strategic planning”* (Getz, 2002: 209). Perhaps of more use in the context of this chapter, i.e., management learning from failure, Getz (2002) then broadly categorised the factors which contribute to failed events into five main areas: *“marketing and planning; external forces; human resources; financial resources and organizational culture”* (Carlsen *et al.*, 2010: 124). The idea of using a broad range of theoretical frameworks and approaches to better manage events is a theme which will be explored later in this chapter.

No matter how we choose to define or analyse a failure, the critical factor is that we take the necessary steps to learn from it. The real ‘value in disaster’ comes from what it can teach us, but this is often overlooked. For many managers and organizations, failure is something to be denied, glossed over, or covered up. So, this chapter will conclude with some practical advice to help event managers to learn from mistakes and mishaps. First, it will identify the range of organizational and personal barriers which can hinder such learning. For example, individual and organizational attitudes to failure and learning, organizational culture, poor management/leadership, ego, reputation, or commercial sensitivities. Second, it will suggest strategies to help event managers to overcome these, which is one of the key aims of the book. Drawing on a broad spectrum of management perspectives, it will suggest a range of tools and techniques to help event managers to both learn from mistakes, and plan for future event success. Because as Henry Ford once said:

“The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.” (Higson & Sturgess, 2021)

How managers learn

This book consists of case studies discussing event failures, broadly structured in accordance with a standard event planning process. The case studies largely address each event, based on published summaries and reflections from those involved in the events, and from those who have researched or reflected on them. It could thus be argued that the book addresses event management learning from a hybrid perspective. It is designed for event management students, lecturers and practitioners, utilising learning from the workplace, in a case study format, based around theoretical planning frameworks.

This hybrid approach seems appropriate given that managers learn in a variety of ways, from formal courses to on-the-job training, to informal ‘water-cooler’ conversations. Although there are numerous management related courses, some would argue that work-based learning is the most effective form of management education, especially if managers are given the room to make mistakes and learn

from them. In terms of event management education, El Kashef (2015) discussed the recent proliferation of event management courses, fuelled by increased demand for professionals to manage events. However, notwithstanding the popularity of these courses, El Kashef (2015) also noted the critical importance of experience for aspiring event managers. He quoted Eraut (1998), whose extensive research into early career learning, indicated that: *“formal education and training provide only a small part of what is learned at work”*, where most learning *“arose naturally out of the demands and challenges of work—solving problems, improving quality and/or productivity, or coping with change”* (Eraut, 1998: 1, in El Kashef, 2015: 3). Each of these are of clear and critical relevance to event managers seeking to learn from failures and find ways to ensure they aren’t repeated.

Often seen as the gold standard of management programmes, many MBA programmes use a case-study approach, which can be a very effective method of learning from failure. Christensen and Carlile (2009) consider that such teaching methods can lead students to become ‘course researchers’, creating theory by examining case studies, such as those included in this book. This could be particularly useful given the identification of gaps in research on theoretical approaches to strengthen event and festival management studies (Kim & Kaewnuch., 2018). However, Prestoungrange (2002: 331) further illustrates the importance of workplace learning, discussing the growth of corporate rather than university business schools, *“built on the assertion that managers learn best at work”*. Prestoungrange (2002) elaborates on Wills’ (1993) work on learning organizations, in which *“feedback from actions taken and evaluated is continually used as the basis to update and amend”* systems, procedures and culture. Creating a culture which embraces the value of action and evaluation, in particular learning from failure, is critical.

Whether course or work-based, much formal teaching is grounded in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle, which indicates that learning is a *“social process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”* (Kolb, 1984: 38). However, it is perhaps Kolb and Kolb’s (2012) iteration of this fundamental theory, the *Experiential Learning Spiral* that is more directly useful to the basic premise of this book, describing *“... the on-going recursive operation of the experiential learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. The cycle is not a circle but a spiral, since each trip through the cycle returns to the experience with new insight gained by reflection, thought and action. Thus, the experiential learning spiral describes how learning from experience leads to development”* (Kolb & Kolb, 2012: 1).

Mumford (1987) acknowledged that management education or training helped managers to work more effectively, but that learning also occurs on the job, *“usually without the help of a management development adviser”* (Mumford, 1987: 49). It could also be said that there are similarities in leadership learning where the *“primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience”* (McCall, 2004: 127). These are fundamental points to consider, given that managers and leaders are the ones most likely to show the way in learning from mistakes, and putting that learning to good use. It also helps to explain why