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Creating Retrospective and Prospective Strategies Dealing with Failures through Failure Management

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Creating Retrospective and Prospective Strategies Dealing with Failures through Failure Management

Abstract

Failures of nonprofit organizations can be used either retrospectively or prospectively. The retrospective approach to failure focuses on how to find and correct the causes of failure. On the other hand, the prospective approach emphasizes more forward-looking ways to benefit from failure and create a new opportunity. But prior studies on such both perspectives on failure have not specified how the two perspectives are materialized in the forms of strategic options in nonprofit organizations. This study used secondary and primary data of nonprofit management, and thereby found the drivers and types of the various strategies which are practiced based on the retrospective and prospective views on failure. The findings of this study are expected to provide some practical implications to those who want to come up with creative strategic options in the face of failures or challenges.

Keywords: nonprofit organizations, failure, benefits of failure, strategy, value chain

Introduction

Failure Management, and Limitation

Creating strategies in nonprofit management is growing into a big issue. Not only turbulent external environment but also more accountable internal control of nonprofit management becomes an impelling driver for devising more sophisticated strategies. Reflecting such trends of nonprofit management, the more standardized strategy-making processes have been studied actively (Eden & Ackermann, 2011; Bryson, 2011), and the strategic options that nonprofit or public organizations can adopt have been academically analyzed and practically recommended (Kotler, 1997; Barry, 1997; Osborne & Plastrik, 2000).

Recently the idea that failure can be a paradoxical seed for creating strategies has come to light. Such idea suggested that nonprofit organizations actually have been using their failures and challenges beneficially to create new opportunities (Hafsi & Thomas, 2005; McGrath, 2011). In an attempt to more systematically describe such beneficial uses of failure of nonprofits, Lee (2012) suggested that there are 16 different ways by which nonprofits can benefit from their failures and challenges. In detail, they empirically showed how the new concept of “failure management” can help both retrospective and prospective activities in the face of failure. The retrospective approach to failure focuses on how to find and correct the causes of failure. On the other hand, the prospective approach emphasizes more forward-looking ways to benefit from failure and create a new opportunity. In sum, the failure management framework can systematically describe how nonprofit organizations can use failures both retrospectively and prospectively.

However the failure management framework (Lee, 2012) did not specify what kinds of strategic options are created through failure management retrospectively and prospectively. In detail, in order to distinguish the retrospective and prospective strategies, what specific activity is to achieve current goals or to pursue new goals needs to be analyzed in terms of the value chain (Porter, 1985) of management activities. But prior studies have rarely analyzed the strategic options in the light of the value chain of management activities. Therefore it has been hard to see how the retrospective and prospective approaches to failure are materialized in the forms of strategic options in nonprofit organizations.

Research Questions

With the problems above in mind, this study aimed to distinguish the retrospective and prospective strategies in the face of failure. In detail, this study explored the answer to the following questions:

- *How do nonprofit organizations manage failures both retrospectively and prospectively?*
- *What drivers distinguish the retrospective and prospective strategies in the face of failure?*
- *What kinds of strategic options represent either retrospective or prospective approaches to failure?*

Methodology

In order to answer those research questions, this study followed the methodology employed by Lee (2012) that used both primary and secondary data on nonprofit management to validate the failure management framework.

1. Exploratory Study with Secondary Data

As an exploratory study, case study with secondary data was conducted to identify the drivers of retrospective and prospective strategies in the face of failure. For the case study, the Kennedy School of Government Case Program with 122 nonprofit cases (as of February 2012) was used as a sampling frame. By using such sampling criteria as accessibility, relevance, sustainability, and clarity, twelve cases were purposively chosen (see Table 1).

[Table 1 Here]

Table 2 summarizes the twelve sampled cases' titles and organization names. In search for the drivers that characterize the retrospective and prospective strategies, the twelve chosen cases were analyzed through structured coding and content analysis. In detail, the iterative analysis on the cases continued to discover the mutually exclusive and comprehensively exhaustive concepts and dimensions behind the distinction between retrospective and prospective strategies until no new factors emerged.

[Table 2 Here]

2. Confirmatory Study with Primary Data

In order to confirm the findings from the cases study with secondary data, more in-depth analysis with primary data followed. The primary data was collected through interviews with the

managers of the nonprofit organizations in the Capital Region of Alpha (pseudonym). The sampling frame was the nonprofit organizations that participated in a seminar hosted by a state university in 2013. Using the nonprobability sampling methods such as voluntary responses and snowball sampling, eleven nonprofit organizations were contacted and interviewed. Table 3 summarizes the characteristics of the organizations interviewed.

[Table 3 Here]

The interviews were conducted to ask about how each organization has dealt with failures and challenges. To avoid the bias from the previous case study findings, open-ended questions were used for the interviews. The interview contents were analyzed by using the analysis templates consisting of the dimensions that had been discovered in the previous case study (see Appendix).

The initial analyses of interviews were sent to the interviewees for their reviews. And the analyses were revised reflecting the interviewees' feedbacks. For the confidentiality of the interviews, the interviewed organizations were de-identified in this article, and instead referred to as *Org. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, and K*.

Findings

The three research questions were answered by the cases study and interviews on nonprofit management that revealed there are some distinctive drivers characterizing the retrospective and prospective strategies in the face of failure as follows.

Drivers of Retrospective and Prospective Strategies

The drivers of the different approaches to failure—i.e., retrospective and prospective strategies—are based on the two dimensions as follows.

Responses to failure: *reality tuning, or goal adapting*

Failure can be operationally defined as “a state where reality is inferior to goal” (Lee, 2012). Based on that operational definition, there are two ways to respond to failure. First, we can try to tune reality to fit the existing goal. Second, we can try to adapt goal to fit the existing reality.

Opportunities from failure: *reality improving, or goal creating*

Besides the responses to failure as above, the opportunities from failure can occur in various ways. To distinguish the different types of opportunities, the fields where opportunity from failure can occur were identified in terms of management activities as follows.

- 10 fields (management activities) where opportunity from failure can occur:
 - Governance/leadership
 - Internal human resources
 - Planning/communication
 - Capacity/system/assets
 - Finance
 - (Relations with) partners/contractors/suppliers
 - (Relations with) customers
 - (Relations with) general public
 - (Relations with) competitors
 - (Relations with) regulators

With the 10 fields of opportunity in mind, there are two types of opportunity from failure. The first type of opportunity from failure is that we can improve reality by using failure as an impetus to change. This opportunity occurs in the same management activity as where failure occurs. The second type of opportunity from failure is that we can create new goal by using failure as a door to new benefits. This opportunity occurs in the management activity different from where failure occurs.

To clarify the meanings of the 10 fields of opportunity, using the interview data, the pattern in which benefits of failure diffuse to every corner of management activities was analyzed. Table 4 shows the relationship between two factors—where failure occurred and where opportunity thanks to failure occurred in management activities. Regarding the relationship between them, the chi-square test for Table 4 resulted in p-value 0.03 which is significant at significance levels 0.05 and 0.1, but not significant at significance level 0.01. Although the frequency is not evenly distributed over all cells, it is also hard to say that there is a definite pattern of the joint distribution. In other words, the benefits of failure seem to diffuse throughout most of management activities.

[Table 4 Here]

Spectrum of retrospective and prospective strategies

By using the two dimensions (i.e., responses to failure and opportunities from failure), the scopes of retrospective and prospective strategies dealing with failure can be systematically described. Table 5 shows the spectrum of retrospective and prospective strategies in the two dimensional matrix. As the retrospective approach to failure is to find and correct the causes of

failure, the upper left area where tuning and improving reality is focused on represents the retrospective approach best. On the other hand, as the prospective approach to failure is to explore new ways to use failure, the lower right area where adapting and creating goal is aimed at represents the prospective approach best. But the line between the two approaches might not be dichotomous but rather continuous. That is why the two approaches are visualized as the opposite ends in a spectrum.

[Table 5 Here]

Four Strategic Options Dealing with Failure

Such continuous distinction between retrospective and prospective strategies can be specified with four discrete strategic options. Each strategic option is one of the combinations of two dimensions. Table 6 shows how the combinations of two dimensions produced four different strategic options dealing with failure. It should be noted again that the line between each of four strategic options is not always clear. The strategic options suggested in this study are rather “archetypes” which are used in mixed forms in practice.

[Table 6 Here]

Each of the four strategic options in Table 6 is explained with the corresponding examples from the interviews as follows.

Spurring

The upper left area represents spurring strategy—the combination of reality tuning and reality improving. This strategy is to use the apparent failure as an impetus to overcome deep-seated

problem at hand. Collins and Porras (1994), in their best seller *Built to Last*, have pointed out this logic by suggesting a concept BHAG (i.e., Big Hairy Audacious Goals) which is an excess goal that can help prompt more efficiency and innovation.

For nonprofit examples, *Org. D*, a medical service organization, encountered an excess negligence in the research process. But *Org. D* used the incident as an impetus to drive nationwide innovation beyond regional scope. In another case of a community development organization, *Org. J*'s newly appointed CEO had to start his new career with excess managerial problems to resolve. But such excess problems rather provided the new CEO with an impelling cause and revolutionary initiative to start from scratch and reform every corner of management.

Revaluing

The lower left area represents *revaluing* strategy—the combination of *goal adapting* and *reality improving*. This strategy is to accept the unwanted and irreversible reality, but make the most of the hidden values accompanied by the reality. For instance, this strategy is incorporated in the so-called “last-mover advantage” which means last mover who lost a lead in market can have an advantage to learn from the first mover’s trial and error. Thus, rather than trying to defeat the first mover, the last mover focuses more on learning by remaining as last mover.

In nonprofit context, *Org. F*, a community development organization, had to deal with inconsistent funds from various fund sources, and tried to pursue a unified fund source. But *Org. F* realized that such diverse fund sources can help spread risks by compensating one another, and decided to benefit such risk-spreading effect of diverse fund sources. For *Org. I* that is a historic sites preservation organization, it had suffered from customer basis change because of the

demographic and cultural changes of the surrounding community. But it turned out that such customer basis changes could help *Org. I* access new and broader basis of customers by developing new programs. Take another example of an agricultural development organization *Org. K*. Faced with the loss of leadership, *Org. K* also lost their strong network for public relations that had been maintained by the former CEO. But thanks to such loss, the traditional public relations through personal network was diffused and replaced by online vehicles such as media outsourcing and social networking services, which in turn allowed *Org. K* to access broader customers and general public more efficiently and widely.

Outflanking

The upper right area represents *outflanking* strategy—the combination of *reality tuning* and *goal creating*. This strategy is to achieve the aimed reality indirectly by pursuing new goal. Yoffie and Cusumano (1999) conceptualized this strategy in their study on “Judo Management” which means, in management, like in the martial art judo, competitor’s excess momentum or investment can be reversely used as his inertia. The essence of this strategy is to focus on achieving aim not by sticking to the traditional and direct manner but by employing newly innovative and indirect ways.

Take nonprofit cases. A local church *Org. A* had to deal with the excess facilities and spaces due to diminishing members. But *Org. A* decided to resolve the problem by opening the church facility to neighboring community and increasing community involvement, and thereby attracted new potential customers. A medical service organization *Org. D* could resolve the deficit problem because such deficiency made it easier to remove inefficient and ineffective programs and services that were otherwise hard to reform. *Org. E*, a public library, also suffered fiscal

difficulties. But *Org. E* could relieve such financial deficiency because the deficit problem prompted *Org. E* to adopt new technologies such as social network service (SNS) as a cheaper and more efficient public relations vehicle. *Org. I*, a historic sites preservation organization, also had financial and managerial difficulties. But such lack of resources stimulated collaborative efforts among the organizations with the similar missions and difficulties. They banded together to get more managerial and political leverages—by sharing customers information for efficient facility management, and also by applying for grants together.

Re-anchoring

The lower right area represents *re-anchoring* strategy—the combination of *goal adapting* and *goal creating*. This strategy is to accept the unwanted and irreversible reality, but explore new goal where failure can be a seed for new success. For Apple, Steve Jobs' death in 2011 was an avoidable loss. But Apple successfully had Steve's death eclipse iPhone 4's problems that had been much criticized before Steve's death (Li, 2011).

In nonprofit cases, both *Org. D* and *Org. E* had experienced managerial and financial difficulties, so external regulators such as inspector and mayor had to get involved in each organization's turnaround management. But such crucial external stakeholders' deep involvement in the reforming process provided themselves with new and deep understanding of the roles and integrities of *Org. D* and *Org. E*, and thereby increased their trust in each organization. Take another example of *Org. C* and *Org. G*. Both had gone through very rough situations in terms of management and marketing. But such turbulent management environment helped test board members' capabilities, and thereby stimulated and purified the boards by having some inactive and ineffective board members resign.

Use of the four strategic options

The frequency of each strategic option in the interviewed cases were counted as follows: *spurring* (8); *revaluing* (14); *outflanking* (22); *re-anchoring* (46). It turned out that *re-anchoring* strategy was used most often. From the aspect of responses to failure, goal adapting (i.e., *revaluing* and *re-anchoring*) was used more often than reality tuning (i.e., *spurring* and *outflanking*). From the aspect of opportunities from failure, goal creating (i.e., *outflanking* and *re-anchoring*) was used more often than reality improving (i.e., *spurring* and *revaluing*). In sum, the interviewed organizations used more prospective strategies than retrospective ones.

Conclusion and Future Research

Creating strategies is easier said than done. The difficulty of making good strategies is partially attributed to the tunnel vision in the face of failure. The more imperative a failure is, the more nearsighted we can be. In other words, we tend to focus more on the retrospective approach to failure, and therefore concentrate our efforts on the correction of failure, easily ignoring the prospective strategies dealing with failure. How can we get over such bounded rationality when failures and challenges confront us?

Using case study and interviews with nonprofit organizations, this study examined how failures can benefit every corner of management, regardless of where management failure occurs. And it was confirmed that failure management helps devise both retrospective and prospective strategies. In detail, there are four strategic options through which we can diversify the diffusion of benefits of failure. Such findings practically imply that the awareness of the four strategic

options can help decision makers consider both retrospective and prospective strategies when faced with failures and challenges.

There are some methodological issues to be addressed in the future research. First, further analyses with more samples will help confirm or disconfirm and thereby complement the existing framework. Second, comparative studies between business and public management will help elucidate the similarities and differences of the strategic applications of the two fields. Third, once the framework is established, quantified data will be collected so that a more generalizable applicability of the framework to various fields can be tested.

When it comes to the strategic options, although this study revealed what strategies are created, it did not show how they are created. Even the same strategic option might be devised and implemented very differently according to each organization's preparedness for failure management. Therefore how different preparedness of organization can beget different failure management will be studied further in the future.

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Tables

Table 1

Sampling Procedure for Nonprofits Case Study

Sampling criteria and sequence	1. Accessibility: Kennedy School of Government Case Program (As of February, 2012)	2. Relevance: Is the main topic about strategic change or performance issue?	3. Sustainability: Is it an exemplary case in terms of size or history (i.e. nation/statewide organization)?	4. Clarity: Is failure or adversity the driver of organizational change?
Cases selected	122 nonprofit cases	40 cases	17 cases	12 cases

Note. Adapted from Lee, Harrison, and Andersen (2016)

Table 2
Twelve Cases Analyzed

Organizations	Case titles	Authors, years
American Red Cross	Tradition, Transformation and a Divided Spirit: A 21st Century Quandary for the <i>American Red Cross</i> .	Varley, 1999
CARE Thailand	Managing Change or Running to Catch Up?: <i>CARE USA</i> and its Mission in Thailand.	Tarr, 1995
CARE USA	Providing Two-Way Feedback: Assessing Headquarters and Field Service Performance at <i>CARE</i> .	Scott, 1995
Community Preservation and Development Corporation	The Test of Transition: The Case of the <i>Community Preservation and Development Corporation</i> (CPDC).	Hoffman, 2010
Empire Blue Cross and Blue Shield	“The Worst Thing That Could Happen”: How <i>Empire Blue Cross and Blue Shield</i> Survived September 11.	Scott, 2002
Land Trust Alliance	Stepping Up to the 'Net: The <i>Land Trust Alliance's</i> Efforts to Make Strategic Use of the Internet.	Levitt, 2000
Urban League	The Challenge of Drastically Changing Times: The <i>Urban League</i> Adjusts to a Post-Civil Rights Landscape.	Varley, 2001
Oxfam America	<i>Oxfam America</i> : Becoming a Global Campaigning Organization.	Scott, 2004
Parents as Teachers	Starting Small, Reaching High: The <i>Parents as Teachers</i> National Center’s Quest for Growth with Quality.	Rosegrant, 2007
Partners for Development	Managing Success: <i>Partners for Development</i> Reorganizes its Dongola Office.	Spicer, 1996
Partnership for Public Service	Extreme Hiring Makeover, Tackling the Federal Employment Crisis— <i>Partnership for Public Service (PPS)</i> .	Lundberg, 2006a, 2006b
Peace Games	<i>Peace Games</i> : A Non-Profit’s Journey from Birth to National Expansion.	Rosegrant, 2005

Note. Adapted from Lee, Harrison, and Andersen (2016)

Table 3
Eleven Organizations Interviewed

Categories		Number of organization	Total
National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) classification	Arts, Culture, and Humanities	2	11
	Educational Institutions	1	
	Health Care	1	
	Disease, Disorders, Medical Disciplines	1	
	Agriculture, Food, Nutrition	1	
	Youth Development	1	
	Community Improvement, Capacity Building	2	
	Science and Technology	1	
	Religion, Spiritual Development	1	
Years since inception	Less than 10 years	2	11
	10 – 30 years	4	
	30 – 50 years	3	
	More than 50 years	2	
Annual expenditure	Less than \$100,000	3	11
	\$100,000 - \$300,000	2	
	\$300,000 - \$500,000	2	
	More than \$500,000	4	

Note. Adapted from Lee, Harrison, and Andersen (2016)

Table 4
Diffusions of Benefits of Failure in Management Activities

Management activity where failure occurred	Management activity where opportunity occurred thanks to failure								
	Governance/leadership	Internal human resources	Planning/communication	Capacity/system/assets	Finance	Partners/contractors/suppliers	General public	Customers	Regulators
Governance/leadership			8	3		1	1		
Internal human resources		1	1			1			
Planning/communication	2	1	3	2				1	
Capacity/system/assets		3		3			3	1	2
Finance	2		1	5	6	5	4	1	2
Partners/contractors/suppliers						1	3		
Customers	2		2	2			1	5	
General public						1	4	2	
Competitors			1			2			
Regulators						1			
Total	6	5	16	15	6	12	16	10	4

Table 5
Spectrum of Retrospective and Prospective Strategies

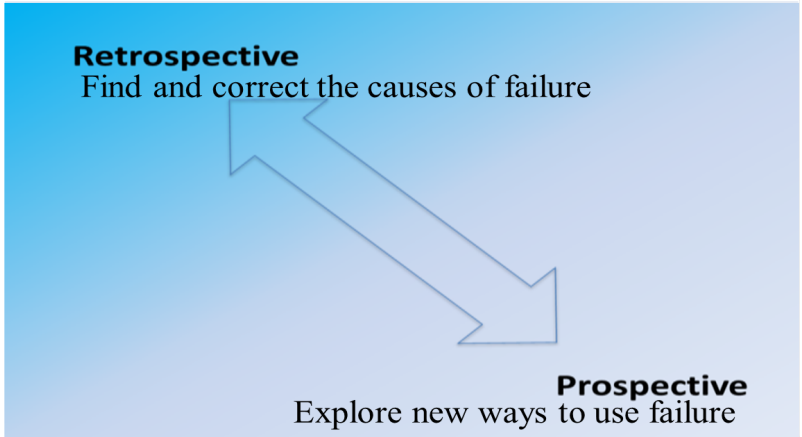
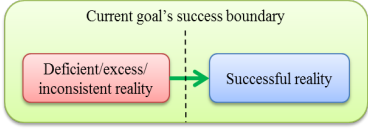
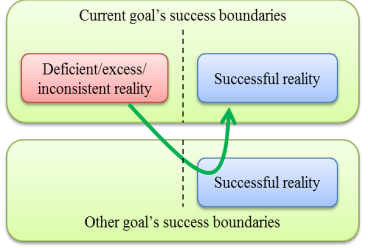
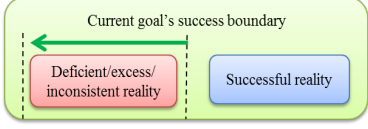
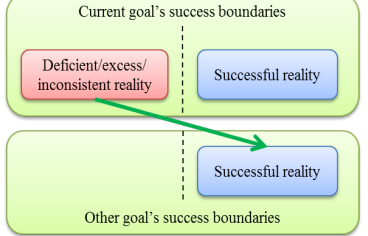
Response to failure	Opportunity from failure	
	Reality improving: Opportunity occurs in the same management activity as where failure occurs.	Goal creating: This opportunity occurs in the management activity different from where failure occurs.
Reality tuning: Changeable or controllable reality is tuned to the existing goal level.		
Goal adapting: Goal is adapted to the unchangeable or uncontrollable reality.		

Table 6
Four Strategic Options Dealing with Failure

Response to failure	Opportunity from failure	
	Reality improving: This opportunity occurs in the same management activity as where failure occurs.	Goal creating: This opportunity occurs in the management activity different from where failure occurs.
Reality tuning: Changeable or controllable reality is tuned to the existing goal level.	Spurring: use the apparent failure as the impetus to overcome deep-seated problem. 	Outflanking: achieve the aimed reality indirectly by pursuing new goal. 
Goal adapting: Goal is adapted to the unchangeable or uncontrollable reality.	Revaluing: accept the unwanted and irreversible reality, but make the most of the hidden values accompanied by the reality. 	Re-anchoring: accept the unwanted and irreversible reality, but explore new goal where failure can be a seed for new success. 

Note. Frequency of each strategic option in the interviewed cases: *Spurring* (8); *Revaluing* (14); *Outflanking* (22); *Re-anchoring* (46).

Appendix

< Data collection and analysis template >

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institution: • Mission description: • Logic of failure (i.e., state where reality is inferior to goal): 									
		Internalized goal - as goal/reference			Internal (endogenous) environment - as reality		External (semi-endogenous or exogenous) environment - as reality		
		mission/values, present strategy/goals (internal innovation, or external positioning in market of target/potential customers)			resources, capacity, process, performance (outputs) of internal innovation or external positioning/goals		mandates (regulators), trends/demand (customers), competition (competitors), support (partners/suppliers), performance (outcome/impact)		
Note: below part in this template is to be filled in for <u>each action per each row</u>									
Case		FM propositions			FM in intra-organizational value chain		FM in inter-organizational value net		FM's contribution to network sustainability
Organization	Case description	Failure type	Purpose using failure	Supporting measures to make FM proposition implementable	where failure occurs in intra-organizational value chain	where opportunity occurs in intra-organizational value chain	where failure occurs in inter-organizational value net	where opportunity occurs in inter-organizational value net	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deficiency • Excess • Inconsistency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Saving • Reforming • Discouraging • Attracting • Complementing 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance/leadership • Planning/communication/business process • Internal human resources • Capacity/system/assets • Finance • Supply chain relations (partner/contractor/supplier) • Customer relations • Public relations • Competitor/regulator relations • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance/leadership • Planning/communication/business process • Internal human resources • Capacity/system/assets • Finance • Supply chain relations (partner/contractor/supplier) • Customer relations • Public relations • Competitor/regulator relations • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder • Partner/volunteer • Contractor • Supplier • Customer • Competitor • Public/advocate • Regulator • Internal affairs • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder • Partner/volunteer • Contractor • Supplier • Customer • Competitor • Public/advocate • Regulator • Internal affairs • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy ego • Healthy partner • Necessary predator: regulator • Necessary predator: competitor • Healthy tie: distance for risk-aversion • Healthy tie: distance for sharing/support • Healthy structure: diversity for risk-aversion • Healthy structure: diversity for sharing/support

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