RESEARCH SUCCESS, NOT JUST FAILURE

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No matter what area of a non-profit organization you work in, chances are you spend a lot of your time trying to find out why something has gone wrong. Why aren't we growing? Why isn't this letter bringing in funds? Why isn't that department functioning efficiently? Why are overall donations down? Why didn't we get that grant?

Management values good problem-solving skills in employees. Trouble-shooting experts are esteemed consultants. Marketing researchers labor to find out why something isn't working. Employees who can fix what's broken receive promotions.

But stop for a moment and think: what do you do when things are going _right_? Managers talk about the importance of how an organization handles failure, but just as important is how it handles success.

Many organizations handle success by breathing a sigh of relief, and focusing on the problem areas. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." And while there's a lot of wisdom to that saying, it's incomplete. It should be, "…don't fix it, but _learn from it_."

Good direct mail people do this all the time. They'll have two versions of the same letter, but one includes a special insert and the other doesn't, for instance. If the special insert version brings in a higher return rate, they know that the insert caused that difference – they're analyzing their success. They measure what worked, and apply that knowledge to their future efforts.

Marketing researchers often hear things such as, "we don't need to do any research about our magazine – it's working great," or "we're growing right now, so we don't need research." Research is often seen as a last-ditch effort to overcome disaster. And while it can be useful to help turn around a failing effort, it's also important to use research to avoid future failures, and build on successes. Understanding and replicating what you're doing right is just as important as discovering and correcting what you're doing wrong.

Think of it this way: is it better to see your dentist regularly even though you don't have a toothache, or is your dentist just for pulling teeth and doing root canals because you didn't take care of things before you ran into trouble?

Analyzing success is not just for marketing research. If you manage people, you've probably had at least a few times of having to pull an employee into your office to find out why her department is under-performing. Have you ever sat down with an employee to explore why her department is running at top efficiency?

Many vendors and job applicants will follow-up with you any time they aren't selected, to find out what they could have done better. How many try to discover why they *were* hired, so they can build on what they've done right?

Understanding your success is important for a number of different reasons:

It helps you replicate that success elsewhere. Once you know what caused the success, you can use that as a model for other business practices. Let's say you work for a major non-profit that wants to try a 30-minute television special to raise funds. The first one is produced, and it works well. The conclusion? "TV fundraising works."

Your organization, flush with success, produces three more specials…all of which bomb. That's often when they would commission marketing research to find out what happened – after the money to produce and air the specials is already spent. How much simpler – and ultimately far less expensive – to have understood why the first special worked before producing the next three.

The amount of time it takes to succeed decreases. Many new ventures are trial-and-error. You simply keep trying ideas until you find one that works. But if you knew that your last three similar programs all succeeded primarily because you reached Hispanic donors, wouldn't you use that knowledge with your next new venture? Without that analysis of past success, you would waste valuable time, effort, and resources stumbling around until you found a way to make things work. With it, you're not starting from scratch each time.

It helps you understand what donors want. Let's say your organization (like many) provides more than one service. An inner-city ministry, for instance, might provide emergency services, shelter, long-term assistance, and education. But what gets your donors excited may be your mission of educating people to help them overcome their poverty permanently. Without this knowledge of what message is succeeding with your donors, your ministry can easily promote the things donors don't care about. That's not what will get them to support your work.

While it's important to understand what you might be saying that turns donors off, it's just as important to understand what turns them on.

It channels resources to the most deserving areas. In marketing research, it is very common to hear, "We don't need to study our current donors, because they're still giving. We need to study our lapsed donors, to fix those problems."

Similarly, it's common for managers to spend much of their time trying to help employees who are under-performing, rather than developing their good employees to even greater accomplishments. And how many organizations have funneled precious funds into fixing a program that isn't working, rather than nurturing a small but effective program into something that could be a flagship for the organization? Any parent or teacher can tell you that one challenge with problem children is that it is easy to lavish so much attention on them that the well-behaved kids end up with less attention than they need and deserve. It's no different in the charitable sector.

It lets you prepare for the future. How many times have you seen an organization (or business, or department) grow rapidly, invest heavily in people and capital to support that growth, then watch it all come crumbling down when the growth stops? Often it's because the organization didn't understand the cause of the growth. They didn't truly know why they were succeeding. Many organizations can grow due to a societal fad or other short-lived reasons.

Imagine the following scenario: staunch environmentalist Al Gore is elected President. His focus on the environment creates rapid growth among environmental and wildlife-oriented causes. Organization A enjoys the growth without thought for what's causing it. They double the budget, hire 100 new staffers, start five new projects, buy a new building, etc.

Organization B carefully analyzes the situation, and while they do everything they can to thrive and grow with this new opportunity, they conclude that it's likely to be a temporary growth spurt. Therefore, they prepare for the day when the environment won't be the hot topic. They rent the increased space they need. They hire people on short-term contracts. They only start three new projects, and build a safety net to ensure that those projects can continue even with a drop in funding. They focus on building long-term loyalty among their new donors, rather than just gathering in new donors by the bushel.

Examples of recent short-term societal trends or situations that affected non-profits include the Men's Movement, the Gulf War, the continuing Wall Street bull market, the televangelism scandals, the Ethiopian famine, and the child sponsorship scandal stories. Each of these still influences American life, but not like at its peak.

On the other hand, long-term trends such as the graying of America, AIDS, terrorism threats, and changes in the traditional definition of family are issues likely to continue affecting non-profits for many years to come.

So do we ignore failures and problems, and focus only on success? Not at all. There will always be mistakes to be fixed, and problems to research. Just remember that it's important to research, understand, and build on what the organization is doing right, as well.

As Alexandre Dumas once wrote, "Nothing succeeds like success." Keep that in mind the next time you're deciding where to invest your time, efforts, and research dollars.

"You always pass failure on the way to success."
MICKEY ROONEY