



“The up-side of failure,” as originally aired on June 10, 2020.

Jeff De Cagna: Hi, I'm Jeff De Cagna executive advisor for Foresight First LLC in Reston, Virginia, arguably one of the most unhelpful phrases in the English language is "failure is not an option." In truth, failure is always an option. Usually an unwelcomed one in the moment, sometimes unnecessary one, but always an option that offers the chance for meaningful learning. And it is this upside of failure that brings us together for this generative conversation with an outstanding panel of association professionals. Each of my colleagues will introduce themselves and generously share a personal story of failure from which we can all learn. Marissa, can you get us started?

Marissa Bankert: Hey everybody. My name is Marissa Bankert and I'm the executive director of the central Pennsylvania independent electrical contractors. We cover eight counties in central Pennsylvania representing about 46 contractor members and about 25 associate partners that employ nearly 3,500 people here in central PA. And so, I'm happy to share with you a procedural failure that happened to us recently. Each year our board does board training and during the board training this year, we went over different types of ways to manage the board meeting and decided to move from a traditional agenda to a consent agenda. We decided this in October, we discussed it at our October board meeting and again, in our November board meeting, letting the members know that starting in January of 2020, we would be moving to this agenda. In January of 2020, when we started doing that agenda, there was definitely some pushback from the membership at large. Not from the members of the board, the members of the board we're happy to move through the agenda and really have a unique kind of control surrounding the timing of everything.

But the members that were used to attending board meetings and seeing it being run in a certain way, certainly did not like the new format of how everything has been. So, we've been really trying to figure out ways to control this, but I really considered it a failure because so many people really seemed to have some reaction to this. And I felt like a part of that had a lot to do with me not doing a better job of educating the membership in mass, of what a consent agenda is. So, that's my most recent failure that I'm happy to share with you.

Burt Blanchard: Great. Hi, all this is Bert Blanchard. I am an association executive here in the industry for over 20 years. Currently, I'm senior director of business

development for Minding Your Business, has been around for 26 years, helping organizations grow. My story that I'm sharing with you today, concerns operations. I had an opportunity years ago in an organization I was with to create a business development, slash sales team, building it from scratch. It was a good idea. We were looking a little light in revenue and needed a new revenue stream, and this was an answer for it. So I pulled together a business plan, gave it to the leadership team, of which the CEO of course was pardoned and the board then got that same plan and then they approved it. So, moved into a director position over a business development group that never existed in its 55 year history.

All that said, the train moved pretty fast. The CEO pulled me from my current, at that time, my current department, which was educational research, and moved me into this department that I was building. One of the things that happened was, and we were moving fast. It was introducing a membership category that was trade in nature, which typically goes by organization, or a company, into an individual based organization. It was kind of countering what we were doing and we had to change our bylaws and all those things, but we needed a new revenue stream. We thought that the engagement with companies would be a better source, where we bundled all their benefits and services together, like going to our conference, and doing our online education, and things like that. Bundled that together, and we put a special price point on that because of the volume that they're bringing in with us.

So that happened, and again, CEO pulled me from my group. I'm reporting directly into the CEO, and this is my failure point. One of the things that happened was, there were great friends and great colleagues, there were some folks that had some longevity there and they'd never been experienced, or had experience in a trade organization format, right? It's been an individual organization for 55 plus years, and I hadn't had that experience. So, where my failure came into play was, again, train moving fast, board approved it, you've got to get this thing going. I'm responsible for a budget. What I didn't take the time to do was really manage through the transition. So, there's a transition and people were freaking out about what this meant, was the memberships that we were going to include in bundles going to usurp the current individual membership base? Or, was there going to be attrition in individual membership, which someone else saw? And then, my group, if you will, the department would grow. So, we didn't know, but those were some valid concerns that happened. And again, I needed to, stepping back, needed to manage those transitions a lot better. Yeah, it was one of those things, and it's a failure that happened when it occurred, but we bounced back, and it actually helped me in the long run. I'll show more about that later.

Peggy McElgunn: Hi, my name is Peggy McElgunn and I have served as a nonprofit executive for 30 years. As an owner of a nonprofit management firm, global professional services PC, I have served in a variety of roles, including executive director, COO, CEO, legal counsel, and just about every department director position possible. I've worked with over 50 organizations, including trade associations, professional societies, accrediting bodies, and credentialing

organizations. And while I have worked in a variety of industries, I'm currently serving in healthcare and social welfare, human service sectors, where I've been for the last 20 years. My story centers around a colossal business failure. It was the annual meeting of one of my healthcare associations back in 2008, that date should ring a bell. It was the year that our history now tells us was the start of the great recession. My meeting, which accounted for a significant portion of my budget, was responsible for sharing the field's advances in science and best practices, and it was scheduled for the last week in March.

That date should be significant as well because it was two weeks after the colossal Bear Stearns bankruptcy. This meeting had served as a reliable and important resource for my organization. In healthcare, annual conferences are more than just connection and opportunities for networking. They advance science and are the main provider for CEUs. That's a necessary ingredient for professions with licenses and credentialing, which include most of healthcare. My 300 person, 45 exhibitor meeting dwindled, literally overnight, to 30 attendees and 10 exhibitors. You see, hospitals just abruptly cut travel. They didn't care if registration fees were paid, and they weren't expecting any kind of refunds. So while I was expecting a few less than my typical 300, I wasn't expecting 30. Surprise, so I had the immediate failure of missing expectations, not just mine, but the board of directors as well. And the expectations of everybody involved speakers, attendees, and exhibitors alike.

I had to mollify everyone on site. We quickly pivoted from podium style lecture, learning to discussion settings, requiring me to go from moderator to facilitator. And while I danced my way through that, we did manage quite well. Attendees and exhibitors and speakers all appreciated the opportunity to explore topics in depth, and actually consider solutions to problems in real time, collectively, rather than expertly. But, once we returned home, it was clear that an annual conference would not be able to satisfy the needs that it had met in the past, in the form of CEU sources, best practices, conduit, and revenue generator, et cetera. So we needed to elevate the reasons for the meeting to understand how we might be able to accomplish our goals more appropriately. The purpose of our meeting was many fold, most obviously, to provide CEUs and that wasn't going to go away, but it was also used to provide connection. And that connection was a chance to discuss things that were going on in the field. And our onsite pivot had shown us discussion was essential.

So turning to the adage that all politics are local. We determined all education was local too. So we pivoted to regional meetings and this provided the in-person connection. That was so important. It was the source for discussion and clarifying best PAC practices. It also offered opportunities for learning both from the podium, and of course, those important hallway discussions. We moved from one annual conference to 10 regional meetings in that first year, and we had over 600 learners and 60 exhibitors in our first year. We have since expanded that to over 30 regional meetings reaching over 1800 attendees and 180 exhibitors, needless to say, this pivot worked. It worked well for everyone and we had a chance to provide more CEUs, meet more attendees where they worked and needed support, and offer

suppliers with more opportunities for recognition, and connection. And highlight and elevate more speakers and experts along the way. But guess what happened two months ago? COVID-19 hit and our 30 person, in person regional meetings, are requiring us to pivot, again. We are pirouetting our way through this event, and I'll give more about that later.

Jeff De Cagna: Great. Well, thank you very much, Peggy, Burt and Marissa. I've got questions to follow up on your stories that I'm hoping we can talk a little bit about. I want to go back to Marissa first with the first question. Your situation was related to your board and governance. I'm curious to know how your board has handled the members' pushback and did the directors and officers see the situation as your failure alone, or for which they shared a measure of responsibility as well?

Marissa Bankert: Those are great questions, Jeff. So, the first part I think is that the board handled the concerns individually with members. Our board does a really good job of taking on that information from members and really listening to them and making them feel like they're a resource, so that's been wonderful. Then, once it reaches that, "Hey, it's not just one person who has an issue," kind of a something, then that's when they approached me. The concern is not just about making sure that the members are educated and that they understand what's going on, but it's also for the future, right? We're constantly recruiting from within our membership for potential board members. So, we need everybody to be on the same page about how it is that we're presented information, how that information is being received. One of the things that we did was to reach out to our entire membership and provide them with access to the consent agenda items in a separate Google drive.

That way they would have access to that information, just like the board does. In a way to say, "Hey, if you want to be a part of this, we're happy to have you be a part of it," and to increase our transparency surrounding all of that. As for your second question, my board definitely did not see it as just my failure. They took responsibility for the fact that they had made that decision. As a matter of fact, several members of my board didn't like that it reflected that it was my decision based off of the fact that I'm the executive director. So they've really made strides to make sure that everyone understands that the board made this decision to move forward with this and the staff implements what the board decides.

Sometimes that can be something that our membership doesn't fully engage in and understand because they're not seeing those kinds of behind the scenes, procedural things, all the time. That's been a real pleasure for me to have my board support me in that way. To even go that further step by saying, "We do these things, Marissa is a part of the staff that helps to implement those things," again as an educational opportunity for our membership.

Jeff De Cagna: Great. Well, thank you, Marissa. I appreciate your response on that. Burt, let me come to you with this question, because when we were preparing for

the session, you had a couple of different stories that you shared with us. It got me thinking about the following that I'm hoping you can comment on. Based on your experience, which do you think is a bigger contributor to failure in associations? Is it the inability to move quickly, which is often the case and with somewhat part of the story in this situation you share with us, or is it more of the reverence for tradition and legacy that exists in associations? What's your thoughts about how each of those are influencing, or affecting failure in associations?

Burt Blanchard: Yeah. Jeff, thanks for asking that. It's a great question. Right? Well, I'd say both, but the number one is the inability to move fast, especially with a time where things like technology. I mean, look at what we're on, right? Look at how we're engaged, right? It's things move fast. So you have to be able to be agile and be able to get on track speedily. But, at the same time, I'm one who leads by EI, emotional intelligence, so your people matter too. I put them both together because they both do matter and you've got to be able to move fast, especially with the instance where I shared that story about building that department. We had no idea what we were doing. We were moving along day by day, hoping it was going to work, and it started working.

We grew that from a \$150,000, we were supposed to hit 150,000 the first year, to a \$1.2 million business or line, if you will, this is an association, within seven years. So a lot of change, a lot of movement happened during that time. One of the things I'd say is, as you're thinking through your people, this is my give back to folks, think of this as a mentoring type opportunity, it is 'prepare for your failure.' There's going to be failures, prepare for the change. Just prepare for the unexpected because it's going to happen. I mean, hello, COVID-19 here we are. How do you prepare for this? How do we know what to do?

Then three, do think about your people and the impact. There is a way to manage that and lead through that, which is really through EI, is what I'd say, right? You just have to afford those opportunities for people to get through your transition, because that's what change is. It's a transition from what they've known and have maybe been comfortable with to something completely new, and that's what I experienced. I failed miserably at it, but got better at it towards the end.

Jeff De Cagna: Well, thanks Burt. I appreciate your response on that question. Your thoughts there. So let me turn to Peggy, because as you mentioned in your story, or your story was in the middle of a fast moving national economic crisis, more than a decade ago, and you were able to pivot and turn failure into success. As you sort of teased in the end of your story, we're now experiencing yet another, this time global crisis, a global public health crisis, and you mentioned that you're pivoting again. So, tell us more about how you're having to pivot. Unfortunately, now that we find ourselves in a global pandemic.

Peggy McElgunn: The global pandemic is unfortunate, but it is a chance for us to step back and look at things differently. As I mentioned, COVID-19 has us looking at

things differently. First, we're looking at this as a global pandemic as an event, not as an inherent system breakdown, which is what the recession was. But the event is exposing some flaws for us, and in our system generally, and how we can work better. We have elevated our considerations yet, again. We're looking at why do we meet? What is the purpose of these meetings? Who is important to bring to the table? Why are these people important to bring to the table? It's necessary and important to look at the job that needs to get done and then see how we can drive our innovation from that perspective, all the while, while trying to tie our work to our mission as well.

From this vantage point, we can see that meetings are for connection, meetings are to share information, education, and best practices. They also provide CEUs. While Zoom meetings, we actually use Get Response, but Zoom meetings, or virtual meetings, can certainly accomplish the goals of information, education, and CEUs. We are looking at ways to incorporate more connection more fully, trying to reach those hallway moments that are so important for adult learners. This really goes beyond mere engagement. We have managed to provide our supplier partners very quickly with guaranteed connection engagement, which was great. This is important for all parties, for learners, and suppliers alike. It provides us with the fuel that we need for continued innovation. But, we have also figured out how to ensure that attendees engage and really comprehend the content, which is necessary for learning, as well as CEU acquisition.

Now, we're just stepping back and looking at how to build personal connections more regularly and reliably. How we can advance connection and actually develop, or encourage the development, of relationships. As you know, people attend meetings not just to learn, but to connect and to come back and see their friends. Reflect on memories and create new ones. And it's very hard to do that virtually, but it's not impossible. We are looking at ways to do this. In fact, we're actually considering a more global way of making that happen instead of, we're going from national, to regional, to now global, way of making connections happen. So, come visit me in six months, I'll let you know if our pirouette has turned our organization on our tippy toes and we're meeting needs, or if I'm just spinning endlessly.

Jeff De Cagna: Well, thank you, Peggy, and hopefully maybe your next effort, your next pirouette, your next pivot could be the subject for a future search conference session that you can share with some of the attendees who were joining us for this session. I really want to thank each of you for your thoughtful perspectives. Now I just want to shift our focus a little bit with the following question, and we'll start with Peggy in a moment and go to Burt, and then Marissa. What piece of advice about learning from failure, would you like to share with our colleagues? Peggy, can you start us off?

Peggy McElgunn: Absolutely. Thank you, Jeff. So my piece of advice is this, don't view failure as that in and of itself. Yes, there are some things that can always be prevented, especially if you have a fantastic crystal ball, but some things we just

can't change. We don't see things coming and our goal should be to do the work with as minimal risk as possible, but recognize that we can't account for everything. So, when we hit a bump in the road, or a boulder in our path, or a pandemic in our workforce, we need to view it as a guide post that we should, or could consider a change in our direction or our approach. Take the failures and opportunity to step back and jump up. Review the elements, or consequences that led to your situation and what you might do to not only prevent it in the future, but view it from an elevated position.

How can you get the work done above and around and beyond that, which is creating the failure in the first place. So, really examine your underlying goals, or the higher purpose of an activity or project, and connect it to your mission. In order to do that, you have to dance on higher ground. You have to pirouette to see all of the factors that may impact your goals and objectives and set out a new path to reach them. Failure allows us to see potential opportunity in a way that reality does not. By stepping back and elevating our worldview we can see longer horizons resulting in much more lasting impacts. Henry Ford said this much better than I could, "There is no person living who isn't capable of doing more than they think they can do." With that in mind, spin, spin, spin, pirouette to your heart's content, and when you do this, your pivot will fulfill your goals more effectively.

Burt Blanchard: Jeff, thanks again for asking that question. You know, if I'm sharing anything I said a little bit earlier, it's preparing. Preparing for the unknown, right? So what I would say, this is my tidbit, this is what I would share with you, prepare for the failure. Failure to me is necessary for success. You're going to have failure, it's going to happen. It's like having the surprise, you don't know what's coming around the corner, but if you're preparing for it, if you have it in your mind, if that's your mindset, something could occur, and it probably will. In my instance, it did, just prepare for it, just know that it's going to happen. That's not original thought that I had, that actually comes from John Maxwell from his book, *Failing Forward*, which is a great book if you've not read that.

Failure is necessary to get to your success, because in that, that's where you're going to learn. You're working through some of those instances that maybe you've never experienced before you're working through the change in my instance where I experienced a failure. Just to kind of tie that up, to let you know, when I did take the opportunity to truly manage through that transition, and let those folks who had the longevity, and weren't accustomed to the change, afford them a voice to just really express what it is they were fearful about, or what this change meant. It went much smoother, so it was another component to it in there. In err, I learned, and here I am on a webinar sharing with you what my failure was. So, that is my one tidbit. Just prepare for that failure because it inevitably will happen. The change will happen, but if you have that mindset and that seeds in your mind that it could happen, you'll be able to respond to it a lot quicker, and without freaking out.

Marissa Bankert: I love what Peggy and Burt said about aligning with mission. Then, also being prepared. I have to admit I'm also a throw it up against the wall and see if it sticks kind of a girl. So for me, I think that you can't be afraid of failure so much so that it doesn't allow you to take risks. I think that that's part of the big lesson for me in all of this is, mine was a procedural thing, but overall I think for our associations, we have to be thoughtful, but it's also okay to take risks. And to seek from outside of what we generally are looking at to find inspiration and resources and all of those things. So for me, that's a big takeaway. The other big takeaway is that I never want to feel like I'm the smartest person in the room.

I always want to feel like I can learn from other people. So having my members call me out and call out our board, I think is awesome. I love the opportunity to engage and hear from people and say, "Well, why wasn't that effective? And how could we have done that differently?" It's this constant learning and ability to find these things out that makes failure awesome in the end. It doesn't feel good at that moment, but in the end it really allows you to move towards something that is more than what you thought your original idea was.

Jeff De Cagna: Well, thank you so much, Marissa. And I'm going to offer my piece of advice as well to our viewers, which is, we live in a world of greatly increased risk and uncertainty. We've been talking about COVID-19 and the challenges that it creates. So, it doesn't feel like a good time to fail, but we have to remember that the very same risk and uncertainty that makes failure so terrifying also makes it more likely to happen no matter what we do. It's much harder to get things right the first time, these days. And while that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to get them, right. My advice is to not lower the ambition of your ideas because you fear failure. But to do more, to think through, how those ideas might work out. Anticipate the potential failures before they occur, so you know what to be looking for as you move forward. Again, I want to, as we close our session, I really want to offer my sincere thanks to Burt, Marissa, and Peggy for excellent stories and wonderful advice. My thanks also to Ashley Neal and Chloe Blair from Sidecar for their help in organizing and recording the session. Finally, my thanks to all of you for being the most important part of SURGE Connect. I hope you will be able to find the upside of failure, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.

Please stay safe and well, thank you.