

Transferable Knowledge: Expressing Lessons Learnt from Failure to Outsiders

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Abstract : Background: The value of lessons learned from failure increases when these insights can be put to use by those who did not experience the failure. While learning from others has mostly been researched between individuals or teams within the same environment, transferring knowledge from the person who experienced the failure to an outsider comes with extra challenges. As sense-making of failure is an individual process leading to different learning experiences, the potential of lessons learned from failure is highly variable depending on who is transferring the lessons learned. Using an integrated framework of linguistic aspects related to attributional egotism, this study aims to offer a complete explanation of the challenges in transferring lessons learned from failures that are experienced by others. Method: A case study of a failed foundation established to address the information needs for GPs in times of COVID-19 has been used. An overview of failure causes and lessons learned were made through a preliminary analysis of data collected in two phases with metaphoric examples of failure types. This was followed up by individual narrative interviews with the board members who have all experienced the same events to analyse the individual variance of lessons learned through discourse analysis. This research design uses the researcher-as-instrument approach since the recipient of these lessons learned is the author himself. Results: Thirteen causes were given why the foundation has failed, and nine lessons were formulated. Based on the individually emphasized events, the explanation of the failure events mentioned by all or three respondents consisted of more linguistic aspects related to attributional egotism than failure events mentioned by only one or two. Moreover, the learning events mentioned by all or three respondents involved lessons learned that are based on changed insight, while the lessons expressed by only one or two are more based on direct value. Retrospectively, the lessons expressed as a group in the first data collection phase seem to have captured some but not all of the direct value lessons. Conclusion: Individual variance in expressing lessons learned to outsiders can be reduced using metaphoric or analogical explanations from a third party. In line with the attributional egotism theory, individuals separated from a group that has experienced the same failure are more likely to refer to failure causes of which the chances to be contradicted are the smallest. Lastly, this study contributes to the academic literature by demonstrating that the use of linguistic analysis is suitable for investigating the knowledge transfer from lessons learned after failure.

Keywords : failure, discourse analysis, knowledge transfer, attributional egotism

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