Beyond Hero Stories

ENGAGE UNCONFERENCE OUTPUT

How can we move beyond hero stories and help understand and learn from failure in public engagement and research impact work?

This presentation shows what we did as part of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) Unconference

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WHO WE ARE

Sarah Morton - theme leader

Director and founder of Matter of Focus - I wanted to lead this stream because I am really concerned that to mature as a sector we need to embed a learning culture that embraces failure. I am worried that the culture of REF impact case studies is focusing only on the positive shiny hero stories.

Facilitators

Holly Rogers Academy of Medical Sciences Charlotte Coales Zoological Society of London, and Peter Lefort, University of Exeter helped to design and facilitate the session.

Participants

This output was generated through discussion with 45 public engagement and research impact professionals from the UK, Canada and beyond.

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set ground rules

we set ground rules to help create a safe space

shared failure stories

we developed a framework for exploring and learning from failure in small groups

shared ideas

we discussed how to move beyond hero stories in our organisations and settings so that other people can lern from this process

WHAT WE DID

We devised a session that would allow people to share failure stories, and also to move the conversations forward as to how we can create a more supportive culture around failure

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WHAT IS A SAFE SPACE?

There was a lot of agreement about creating safe spaces. This is the agreement we used so that people who had never met before felt safe sharing failure stories

Relational agreement

We agree
- Not to share identifiable details of any other participant's story without their explicit consent.

- To respect the privacy of information that is shared during sessions, not copy, screenshot or otherwise record without permission

- To find ways to communicate with respect, care and compassion for ourselves and each other, including listening at least as much as we speak; speaking one at a time without interrupting; supporting all voices to be heard.

- To practice appreciation and gratitude in receiving and sharing our stories.

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WHAT DID YOU DO?

Were there planning or foresight failures?

Were there capacity or resource failures?

External or internal influences on what went wrong?

WHO DID YOU AIM TO ENGAGE AND INVOLVE?

Were you able to engage the right people?

Was engagement a key part of what went wrong?

How did people feel about the work?

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

Were you able to take any learning from what went wrong?

Who learned what during this work?

Was everyone able to own up to the failings?

How did you process the learning?

WHAT WILL YOU DO DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME?

How have you done things differently since this?

Were you able to apply learning immediately?

Have you repeated any of the failings?

A FRAMEWORK FOR SHARING FAILURE STORIES

We used this framework to interview each other about our failure stories

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HOW CAN WE MOVE BEYOND HERO STORIES?

We used a problem framework to think about how we move beyond hero stories. This allowed us to think about the problem, what the solution looked like and to explore what we can do to reach solutions.

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DEFINE AND REVERSE THE PROBLEM

why is it difficult to move beyond hero stories?

DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Need institutional incentives, modelled by leaders, to share failures openly to improve organisational learning.

Ownership of outcomes (which is then success or fail) can be in conflict with ownership of learning (I should see what can be done better). I struggled to report/be open about the latter because it would undermine what my funder wanted for the former.

Mainly positive examples of impact are shared.

We don't talk about failure and learn from it.

We assume that impact is always positive and don't recognise the inevitability of +ve and -ve intended and unintended outcomes, which look different from different perspectives and can change over time etc...

Still trying to convince colleagues PPI is a good thing to do, so less motivated/confident sharing failure in case it puts people off.

Not understanding needs beyond ourselves.

REVERSE THE PROBLEM

We are empowered to talk about failure.

Learning from failure is embedded in the sector.

How to create enabling conditions that create collective accountability for learning?

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HOW DİD PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT THE FAİLURES THEY TALKED ABOUT?

Felt safe, but there are not very many safe spaces to do this.

Nice to not feel like you had to be positive.

A good experience, comfortable in a supportive group.

The ground rules up front set the tone for a safe space.

Embarrassed that I hadn't talked about it much before - revealed a lot, helped to revisit it.

Virtual world can create technological exclusion - missing out on parts of the conversation.

Reminder that it needs to be revisited, not brushed under the carpet.

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HOW DO WE WANT PEOPLE TO FEEL WHEN SHARING EXAMPLES OF FAILURE?

Safe and supported environment to share and have the learning taken further by others.

Allowing something good to come from it.

Not being judged or blamed.

Listened to and a sense of solidarity.

Feel that there is space to debrief.

An open environment without people needing to immediately give advice in response.

'Normal' (awful word I know) - it isn't brave or notable, it's just obvious to do.

A sense of shared responsible. The failure is everyones

Frame failure as unintended consequences of our activity. Values are so important in this.

If you're not failing, you're not innovating.

Failure is only really a failure when we don't learn!

Clarity on how success is defined.

Taking account of the power relationship in the sharing - to whom are you disclosing?

We're all accountable for outcomes - not just one group to own success or failure.

Mindset that failure can prevent broader waste of effort or resources.

Important to look at all contributors to failure - hard to establish in orgs and between systems.

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- Have a 'failure session' at each team meeting
- Incentivise people to share failure
- Get funders to request a section in reports about what went wrong
- Hold meetings, world cafe sessions and other opportunities to talk about failure

Where institutional culture or fear is too rampant, push for a learning framing as a start.

leaders need to set the tone and model good behavior in sharing failures

- Reframe failure as learning
- Find allies and buddies to create spaces where you can embed this into your work
- Create cross-institutional support to be open about failure and learning

PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR MOVING BEYOND HERO STORIES

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WHAT NEXT?

We will take this to the engage conference and add to the practical ideas for moving beyond hero stories

At Matter of Focus we are planning on holding more sessions on sharing failure

What will you do?

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