Sharing experiences of failure at work – enablers and barriers

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Abstract

Experiences made in ongoing projects are an important source of learning and innovation in professional service firms. Experiences of failure have been pointed out to be especially valuable, at the same time as professionals are less likely to share such experiences. The current paper investigates the enablers and barriers of experience sharing in two professional service firms – a media consulting firm and a leadership consulting firm. The paper identifies a number of enablers and barriers to experience sharing and shows that these differ between success experiences and failure experiences. We conclude that consultants' concerns with their image on the internal labor market is a key mechanism shaping their decision whether to share knowledge. We further find that professional knowledge related to building open cultures may be a barrier to building these cultures in the own firm and that clear norms regarding desired behaviors are important to reduce the perceived risks to the professional reputation involved in knowledge sharing.

Introduction

Previous research on organizational learning and knowledge sharing suggest that failures can be an important source of learning that enhances different outcomes such as productivity, performance, innovation, decision-making, security, resilience and organizational development (McGrath, 1999; Sitkin, 1992). Some even claim that for success to occur, the organization and its employees must have learned from its prior mistakes, and several scholars have acknowledged that learning from experience is driven primarily by errors and failures (e.g. Lipshitz & Barak, 2005; March, 1994). This is especially relevant for professional service firms, that depend on their ability not only to exploit existing knowledge but to continuously develop this knowledge based on experiences in their day to day engagements with clients (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Sarvary, 1999). For learning from failure in an organization to occur a fundamental prerequisite is that people are willing to share their own failure experiences with others.

"Failure experience" here refers to a person´s experience of a negative deviation from expected or desired goals or results derived from his/her own action. "Failure sharing" is a conscious act by an individual who participates in the disclosure of failure that is not officially required by the organization (Boey & Chuang, 2016).

While there has been extensive research on knowledge sharing in organizations (Wang & Noe, 2010), sharing experiences of failure has only to a very limited extent been studied. Research on errors in organizations (Catino & Patriotta, 2013), however highlights the specific nature of failures in an organizational context. Failures have been argued to involve a different set of emotions than successes or more neutral experiences, which may lead to different mechanisms enabling and limiting their sharing. Scholars have proposed that the literature too seldom recognizes the importance of negative emotions in the failure experience (Huy, 1999; Shepherd, 2003; Zhao, 2011). However, prior studies operate under the assumption that people are willing to share their experience of failure. This ignores the most fundamental element in the "failure sharing" challenge, as we lack knowledge about the conditions, factors and mechanisms influencing this willingness to share experiences of failure. Additionally, previous research has only to a very limited extent studied the enablers and barriers to the sharing of failure experiences, which is of great importance "because team and organizational level knowledge is influenced by the extent to which knowledge sharing occurs between people in the

organization" (Wang & Noe, 2010, p.116). We understand sharing experiences of failure as the first essential step to knowledge sharing and organizational learning based on these failures.

Thus, the focus of the current paper is to investigate which factors influence peoples' perceptions and willingness to share or not to share an experienced failure at work. The present study could be viewed as a special case within the field of knowledge sharing. More specifically, the paper asks the following research question:

- What are the *enablers* and *barriers* to the sharing of failure experiences at work, and what *mechanisms* are involved?

Literature review – enablers and barriers of knowledge sharing

As mentioned earlier our focus is to investigate what factors influence peoples' perceptions and willingness to share or not to share an experienced failure at work. Since, this topic only to a very limited extent has been studied we use the broader knowledge sharing literature as starting point.

Previous literature in the field of knowledge sharing has identified a number of factors that influence the sharing of knowledge in organizations. The most common levels of analysis have been organizational context, interpersonal and team characteristics, individual characteristics, cultural characteristics, and motivational factors (see Wang & Noe, 2010). We here limit our review to organizational context, interpersonal characteristics, and motivational factors. Culture characteristics, team characteristics, and individual characteristics are beyond our scope.

Organizational context

Organizational culture and climate. Trust has attracted the most attention in previous research. A culture that emphasizes trust has been identified to help reduce the negative effect of perceived costs on sharing (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005). Moreover, an organizational climate that emphasizes individual competition may impede sharing whereas cooperative team perceptions help create trust, that support sharing (Chih-Chien, 2004; Schepers & Van den Berg, Peter T, 2007; Willem & Scarbrough, 2006). According to Catino & Patriotta (2013) negative emotions involved in collective confessions reinforced the diffusion of safety principles from the individual to the organizational level – linking to shame and regret. However, a safety culture downplayed individualism and encouraged the sharing of information and learning. Other considerable barriers at the organizational level to the sharing of failure

experiences were organizational culture that stigmatizes failure (Cannon & Edmondson, 2001; Prahalad & Oosterveld, 1999) and a non-supportive work environment (Edmondson, 1996).

Management support has been shown to be positively associated with individuals' perception of a knowledge sharing culture (e.g. trust, willingness to help) and willingness to share knowledge (Connelly & Kevin Kelloway, 2003; Svetlik, Stavrou-Costea, & Lin, 2007) (Liao, 2008). Managers' control over rewards for desired behavior (i.e. reward power) and the person's belief that the manager had knowledge and expertise in the area (i.e. expert power) were positively related to sharing.

Rewards and incentives. Ferrin & Dirks (2003) found that a cooperative reward system positively affected information sharing between partners whereas a competitive system had the opposite effect. Furthermore, studies that have examined the influence of group-based incentives generally found positive effects compared to those that examined individual incentives, piece-rate and tournament incentives (e.g., Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007; Taylor, 2006). Weiss (1999) explained that the billable hour system used for many professional jobs such as consultants or lawyers is a barrier to knowledge sharing. Consultants do not bill clients for time devoted to knowledge sharing because clients are unwilling to pay for services from which they do not receive an exclusive benefit. Therefore, the incentives support serving clients and not sharing knowledge.

Organizational structure. A functionally segmented structure inhibits sharing, and a less centralized organization supports sharing (Kim & Lee, 2006; Tagliaventi & Mattarelli, 2006). These studies also suggest that organizations should create opportunities for interaction at the workplace, and that rank, position in the organizational hierarchy, and seniority should be deemphasized to support sharing.

Interpersonal characteristics and social networks

Social connections. A few studies have examined the role of social connections with other group members in knowledge sharing (Phillips, Mannix, Neale, & Gruenfeld, 2004; Thomas-Hunt, Ogden, & Neale, 2003). These studies suggest that socially isolated members are more likely to disagree with others and contribute their unique knowledge within a heterogeneous team.

Social networks. Some studies have focused more on relationships than individuals. The ties among people within social networks can facilitate knowledge sharing (e.g. Cross & Cummings, 2004; Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Reagans and McEvily (2003) found tie strength and social cohesion to be positively related to the ease of knowledge sharing, suggesting that the connections with knowledge recipients may motivate providers to share knowledge.

Motivational factors

Impression management and attribution – people in organizations may choose to share knowledge as a way or strategy to influence and develop personal relationships with peers to simply manage their impression on others. This influences with whom knowledge is shared. Impression management can both support and impede the sharing of knowledge. If knowledge sharing behavior is attributed to impression management motives or politics, knowledge providers are likely to be viewed less favorably and the recipient is less likely to reciprocate by sharing knowledge (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008).

Power and superiority can be an inhibitor of knowledge sharing. Knowledge can be considered a source of power and superiority (e.g. Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Szulanski, 1996). In contexts where employees' unique knowledge results in positive evaluations (e.g. promotions) it can create a disincentive for knowledge sharing because by sharing knowledge it becomes a common good and individuals lose their distinctiveness and competitiveness to others. Few studies have directly examined sharing from a power perspective (see Liao, 2008; Renzl, 2008).

Perceived benefits and costs are one of the most studied antecedents of knowledge sharing, especially in professional communities. Perceived benefits are positively associated with engaging in knowledge sharing while perceived costs have a negative influence. However, prior research seems to suggest that knowledge sharing is more strongly related to employees' beliefs that their shared knowledge is useful to others than personal benefits they gain, especially in professional networks (Chiu et al., 2006; Siemsen et al., 2007; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Hew and Hara (2007) concluded that lack of time and unfamiliarity with the receiver were the two main inhibitors when examining perceived costs that might inhibit knowledge sharing in professional communities. Similarly, Kankanhalli et al. (2005) found that the more time and effort employees perceived as necessary to codify knowledge in order to share it, the less likely they are to engage in knowledge sharing.

Interpersonal trust and justice. Mainly social exchange theory has been used when examining how trust and justice relate to knowledge sharing. Researchers point out that examining trust and justice is important since knowledge sharing involves providing knowledge to others with expectations of reciprocity (e.g., Wu, Hsu, & Yeh, 2007). Trust has also been examined as an antecedent or mediator of knowledge sharing (e.g., Butler, 1999; Lin, 2007). Research has shown that affect- and cognition-based trust have a positive influence on knowledge sharing at the dyadic and team levels (Chowdhury, 2005; Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006; Wu et al., 2007).

Positive feedback and organizational recognition – both the knowledge shared and how it has helped the organization, can enhance sharers' self-perception of competence, credibility, and confidence (cf. Stasser & Titus, 2003) and increase their likelihood of sharing knowledge with others.

Social costs occur when individuals are likely to share knowledge that might be inconsistent with other´s knowledge. Disagreement likely facilitates the development of new ideas, contributing to innovation and creativity. Social cost can also impede sharing when it might reveal failures or errors made by an employee´s boss or influential peer (Wang & Noe, 2010).

The current review has disclosed several areas that need more focus to better understand what facilitates and impedes sharing of failure experiences at the workplace. Most past research has focused on the organizational context (organizational culture and climate, rewards, management support and structure), or on interpersonal social exchange (trust, attitudes, social costs), separately. Some studies have tended to investigate the direct relationship between the context and the individual, but few studies have examined its interaction. Therefore, we are interested in understanding the interaction between the organizational context and the individuals acting in the specific context.

Further, we conclude that more research is needed to understand how an experience sharing culture can be promoted and to empirically investigate how such a culture can affect the dynamics of experience sharing and learning.

Another issue is the domination of studies having a positivistic approach, and using mainly quantitative methods. More qualitative studies are needed that focus on specific problems to help us better design quantitative studies

Finally, previous research in knowledge sharing does not separate between different *types* of experiences, i.e. positive (success) and/or negative (failure) experiences. A very limited number of studies has focused on emotional issues that may constitute a hinder to sharing experiences of failure.

Method

Data collection

Fieldwork was carried out in Nov-Dec 2016 in two different Swedish professional service firms - a Media consulting firm (which in the following will be called "Media consultants" and an Organization- and Leadership Development consulting firm ("Leadership consultants"). Data collection relied on two main sources:

1. Qualitative semi-structured interviews;
2. Observations of team meetings.

We carried out 25 formal semi-structured interviews (45-60 minutes) in which we explored respondents' reasoning regarding their choices to share experiences of failure, and, in order to have a contrast, success with their peers. We conducted 13 interviews in the Media consulting firm and 12 in the Leadership consulting firm. The semi-structured interviews gave the respondents opportunities to shape the conversation, and as rapport developed, respondents revealed their perceptions and conditions that influenced their decision to share or not to share successes and failures.

The focus on both success and failure (rather than only focusing on failure experiences) also created a safer interview atmosphere. Talking about the sharing of both failures and successes was a way to create conditions for openness in the interview. As mentioned above, asking only for failure experiences may trigger negative emotional reactions, which can make the interviewee feel insecure and defensive.

 In selecting the sample, we aimed to include as much variety as possible in terms of years in the company, age, experience, gender and roles. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interviews focused on four different types of knowledge sharing situations: 1) sharing of an experienced success; 2) sharing of an experienced failure; 3) non-sharing of an experienced success; and, 4) non-sharing of an experienced failure. Prior to the interview, the interviewees were asked to think about a concrete situation representing each of the four types.

The interviews then focused on exploring the nature of the situation, the factors that led the respondents to the decision to share/not share and the perceived consequences of that decision.

In addition, we observed two meetings per organization. All meetings had some elements of sharing of information among the participants, e.g. a project meeting dealing with a certain customer delivery, a weekly team meeting led by a team manager were the team members shared different events and reflections from past week and informed about happenings in the week to come.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out as an inductive process in which we identified the characteristics of the processes, activities and behaviors that underlie the sharing of successes and failures at the workplace. We adopted a social constructionist position in the analysis. This contends that our reality is determined by the way in which we experience and understand the world that we construct and reconstruct for ourselves in interaction with others (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). To adopt such a position requires an acceptance of the ways in which the researcher interacts with the researched to jointly shape the constructions of each other.

The transcribed data was categorized during the coding into several concepts using NVivo11 coding software. The main concepts that emerged were; *supporting, hindering, channels (e.g. e-mail, intranet, face-to-face), reactions (cognitive, emotional), coping, type of knowledge,* and *consequences.* The concepts *supporting* and *hindering* were especially focused. Within these two categories 97 sub-categories emerged. 43 sub-categories were linked to supporting experience sharing (e.g. small group, compassion, trust, norm to share) and 51 linked to hindering experience sharing (e.g. being judged by others, internal competition, perceived deficiency of interest, negative image). During coding, clusters among the sub-categories that occurred most frequently in the data emerged. These clusters were then aggregated into the main categories that will be reported below. For example the sub-categories: "small group", "compassion", and "perceived trust" were merged into the main category: *trust and compassion in the small group.* Further the sub-categories: "perceived deficiency of interest", and "unsure if anyone is interested" were merged into main category *perceived lack of interest.*

The main categories were then structured into influencing factors that either support or hinder sharing. In Media Consultants, we identified seven enablers and seven barriers, while in

Leadership Consultants, we identified four enablers and six barriers. The continuous movement between data and concepts ended when we had defined enough categories and factors to explain what was observed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Experience sharing in two Professional Service Firms

Case 1 - Media consultants

Background and structure

Media Consultants was founded in 2000 and with its approx. 30 employees and a turnover of 40 MSkr, it's one of the most successful companies in its industry. The organization has been profitable since the start and has achieved several awards, for example most satisfied customers, most satisfied employees, and fastest growing profitable company. The company operates mainly on the Swedish market, the head office is in Stockholm, and the services offered focus on media relations and lobbying. The customers reside both in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. Their mission is to contribute to that more people participate in the public debate, which favors both democracy and social development.

Media consultants is a privately owned limited company. The founder and CEO owns 50,1 percent of the shares, and a second founder 26,5 percent. The rest is owned by 16 partners who have worked in the company for an average of eight years. 60% of the profits are shared among the owners and 40% is distributed equally among all employees.

The company is headed and managed by the CEO with the help of a management team consisting of seven members: CEO, office manager, financial manager and four unit managers. The organization consists of four business units based on different consultancy competencies. Each unit consists of five to eight consultants reporting to a unit manager. Services are delivered mainly in project form based on different customer engagements. Each customer has a client manager appointed and the projects are led by a project manager. The staffing process is highly decentralized, and takes place in negotiations between client manager, project manager and consultant. Each consultant is accountable for his own utilization rate and target, which is followed up monthly by the CEO. This implies that the consultants' perceived that they were constantly acting on an internal competitive labor market, where they were judged by and with their colleagues:

It´s like an internal labor market. Nothing is for free. You must show your skills, and sell yourself to your peers.

Recruitment of new employees is one of the company's most strategic processes for long-term success. Therefore, the CEO personally controls and spends considerable time on this process. Attention is paid to personal qualities such as kindness, responsibility and self-esteem, in addition to professional skills. Key features of the management process are weekly team meetings led by the unit manager, and monthly company-wide meetings led by the CEO and the management team. The objective is to bring in external input or share ideas and experiences from recent projects, and to identify prospective customers.

The company's value system shows that commitment and openness are shared values. Commitment means to only accept assignments where both the company and the consultants involved in the assignment are sympathizing with the causes of the client. Openness means to respect and defend the open democratic process. The CEO and management team work actively to create what is called a success- and feedback culture. This means that the CEO and the management team constantly encourage employees to actively share and spread successes:

The culture is strengthened by the CEO who strongly promotes sharing of successes. Those who share a success get a strong positive reinforcement.

Positive feedback from customers, so-called "customer bragging" is shared extensively by the employees via e-mail. The aim is to create positive energy that is considered to lead to higher motivation and better results.

Continuous feedback is also encouraged by the CEO and management. Every employee should constantly pay attention to what went well in a situation and to reinforce this, but also what could have been done better and to analyze what might be done differently next time. In case a customer gives criticism or negative feedback, that information should always be communicated with the CEO. The company actively works with what they call "a profitable kindness culture", i.e. wanting others well, and they are convinced that when the employees feel confident and are helpful to each other, cooperation becomes more efficient, creativity increases and quality increases. Media consultants point to some practical measures that enforce the kindness culture: 1) Say hello to everyone, 2) Show your commitment, 3) Give a lot of positive feedback 4) Dare to make mistakes - everyone wants to feel safe, so be open about

mistakes and failures at work. Management has also developed several governing mechanisms that reward generosity and kindness. For example, senior consultants are followed-up on how many customer relationships they shared with more junior consultants.

Experience sharing

The overall impression from the interviews in Media Consultants is that experience sharing of successes and failures differs. The sharing of experiences of success is described as a promoted, on-going process and an important way to maintain a "culture of success", which is assumed to produce positive energy and atmosphere. Hence, experiences of successes are frequently shared to everyone in the company. Sharing an experienced failure, in contrast, is carefully reflected on by the consultant. Whether to share, and with whom to share are perceived as important questions that are given considerable thought.

Sharing experiences of success

The typical success that is shared in Media Consultants is related to commercial aspects such as selling a big assignment to a prestigious client or to a successful delivery in which a client was perceived as highly satisfied. The analysis of the interviewees' examples of sharing (and not sharing) success experiences revealed a number of enablers as well as barriers. (see table 1)

Enablers of sharing success experiences	Barriers to sharing success experiences
• Success culture • Formal arenas	• Fear to be perceived as bragging • Lack of time

Table 1. Enablers and barriers of sharing success experiences in Media Consultants

The sharing of success experiences is strongly promoted in the organization, especially from management. To boost energy and maintain a *success culture* experiences of successes are frequently shared to everyone in the organization, mainly through e-mail:

> *We are encouraged to share experiences of successes, because in this type of business the climate affects the outcome.*

> *The most common thing is that successes are emailed to everyone when something is done well. It is a strong and conscious culture that has settled.*

> *In our company, you actively share "brag" with each other to boost yourself and others.*

Media Consultants also identified a number of *formal arenas* that supported their sharing of successes in a face-to-face context:

> *We invited everyone to a "sharing lunch". There we shared what happened, why things went well, and important lessons learned.*

> *[We share experiences] in both large and smaller groups. Last week, in a plenary at our monthly meeting, I shared a customer case where, thanks to a method I had developed, we won the deal.*

In addition to these enablers of the sharing of successes, the interviews also pointed at several barriers. These were closely related to concerns about how sharing would influence the consultants' image among peers and they reflected in detail on what to say and what not, often leading to a high level of self-censorship. The first, and most often mentioned barrier was the consultants' *fear to be perceived as bragging*:

> *I do not want to be perceived as a "bragger"- especially during periods when I´m successful. Then it may be too much of me.*

> *I would not glorify myself. It was such a small thing I experienced. It´s easier to highlight successes where I can promote someone else.*

The second barrier to sharing experiences of success was *lack of time*:

> *Didn't have the time, and then it was too late.*

> *Time pressure*

To summarize, sharing experiences of success in Media Consultants, was perceived as un-problematic. Sharing was rather perceived as "a must" to follow and live the expressed success norms that had been cultivated since the company started. Some consultants reported that they at first perceived the behavior of sharing "customer bragging" as odd compared to previous work places, but with time they had learned to appreciate it as a well functioning strategy to create positive energy.

Sharing experiences of failure

The sharing of experiences of failure was to a larger extent than the sharing of experiences of successes described as a negative emotional experience. Emotions mentioned in the interviews included disappointment, self-criticism, guilt and shame. Five enablers and five barriers to the sharing of failure experiences were recurrently mentioned (see table 2).

Enablers of sharing failure experiences	Barriers to sharing failure experiences
- Trustful and compassionate relationships - Improvement focus - Feedback culture - Formal arenas - High status	- Success culture - Internal competition - Lack of time - Lack of processes and know-how - Low status

Table 2. Enablers and barriers of sharing failure experiences in Media Consultants

Those who shared experiences of failure were met with positive reactions from peers. Reported responses were positive feedback, compassion, constructive feedback, curiosity and interest.

Several consultants showed a positive attitude towards sharing experiences of failure. They perceived that sharing would benefit aspects such as: individual and organizational learning and development; trustful, open, safe, and reliable relationships; and less fear of negative image impact:

> *It strengthens our relationships even more. Lessens the risk that someone feel bad, and enhances competence and learning.*

> *We get closer to each other. It relieves our stress, and makes us less afraid to share failures. We also get less harsh on ourselves.*

The main enabler of sharing experiences of failure was the existence of *trustful and compassionate relationships*. Most of the sharing of failure experiences took place in the context of these relationships, personally and face-to-face. Consultants typically had such relationships with a small number of individuals, which they had established during their careers in Media Consultants. Previous and repeated collaboration in projects was a common source of these relationships:

> *In personal conversations, and in smaller groups. Where I feel trust, I have no problem sharing my failures,*

> *If you email to everyone, you may be misinterpreted. In a personal conversation it is easier to explain and get compassion, sharing personally becomes more intimate.*

Also contributing to the willingness to share experiences of failure was the explicit *improvement focus*. In the role as media consultant you are accountable to seek out areas for improvement in everything you, or others, do:

> *Our management is looking for constant improvement. They always ask for improvements in everything you do. It´s a constant pressure from the CEO. If you have done a mistake, you should ask yourself: what is then the learning opportunity? These signals come from the top.*

Linked to the improvement focus is a third enabler in the shape of a habit of giving and receiving *feedback*. This is a method, used continuously within Media Consultants, that supports the sharing of experiences of failure:

> *We are supposed to give each other feedback, it´s a strong feedback culture. After a customer meeting I ask myself the question: what could we have done better? Although it went well, there must be three things we could do better. This culture helps us to be open and honest with things that went bad, which gives an opportunity to do even better. Making mistakes is not a failure – rather it helps us to do better next time.*

> *We actively give each other feedback - and we are used to it. You can also give feedback to yourself. I think that our feedback culture can help us sharing experiences of failure, because we constantly give feedback to each other especially about what happens in customer meetings. We often reflect upon how we work and how we can improve.*

A fourth enabler of sharing failures was the existance of *formal arenas* with the purpose of sharing both experienced successes and failures among peers:

We invited everyone to a "sharing lunch", where we shared experiences from client work, and successes. Even pitfalls and failures were shared.

We have unit meetings, where you can share experiences. However, the character of the meetings differs. We have had "hit and shit" as a weekly concept. But it requires more from the manager to establish an atmosphere where it feels rewarding to share failures. It puts higher demands on the manager.

The fifth enabler of sharing experiences of failure is *high status*. In a rather homogeneous group of employees, there is some sort of meritocracy. Experienced and successful consultants are attributed higher status than less experienced and successful ones. Consultants with higher status show greater willingness to share their failures, since they perceive less risk of negative image impact. They rather see it as an opportunity to balance their success, and to contribute to an open and trustful relationship:

Being able to talk openly both when it's going well and when it's going bad. Since I'm a successful consultant, it's good that I share my failures.

Personally, I have no problem sharing. Maybe it is easier for me to share failures since I'm experienced and successful in the eyes of others.

The main *barrier* to sharing experiences of failures is Media consultant´s *success culture*, which also was the main enabler for sharing experiences of success. Consultants perceived that sharing of failures could be a potential threat to the positive energy and atmosphere created in the organization:

Maybe the concern and care to spread positive energy to each other can prevent us from sharing failures.

I don´t want to adversely affect the positive success culture. I have noticed that we share relatively few failures compared to successes. It happens, but rarely.

There is a risk that if we begin to share too much of our failures it could negatively affect our culture of success. This is a barrier.

Another distinct barrier to sharing experiences of failure is *internal competition.* The Media consultants constantly perceive that they are acting on an internal labor market on which they are concerned with how they are perceived by their peers. The main fear is to gain a negative image and thus not be chosen for future projects:

> *This is like an internal job market. Nothing is for free. Everyone needs to prove themselves. You constantly have to sell yourself to colleagues. If you start to share failures the risk is that nobody wants to work with you. The consequence is nobody share failures – it´s too risky.*

> *We are consultants and we face internal competition. Therefore, it is better not to share failures. Say if, person A made three mistakes and shared them and person B made the same three mistakes but did not share them, the likelihood is that you will choose person B for your assignment.*

The third barrier to sharing experiences of failure is *lack of time.* Media consultants work in a billable hour system that creates constant time pressure. They mentioned that when sharing an experience of failure, they needed to be more prepared and precise on how to share the experience with peers, compared to when sharing experiences of success:

> *It's harder and takes more time to share failures. You disclose yourself, it takes more time because you want to explain.*

> *It´s difficult to set off time when I hear someone sharing, and then initiate a dialogue to analyze the potential learning from the failure. Lack of time is the biggest obstacle. During periods when we train feedback, we usually do it more often. The high level of ambition easily gets lost.*

Another barrier mentioned was *lack of processes and know-how.* Media consultants reasoned about a shortage of processes and knowledge about how to share experiences of failures in a way that would provide valuable learning - instead of harming oneself and/or the organization. In addition, Media consultants expressed a need to understand how sharing of experienced failures contributed to learning and development:

> *We do not have the knowledge or the mechanisms for how to develop learning out of failures and it´s a barrier to us. We lack an infrastructure. I noticed*

that when I shared a failure at the unit meeting, my colleagues wanted me to share even more, for example, under the "give or take" session in the meeting.

We need more knowledge about the benefits and how to share constructively. I even got an insight when you [the researchers] were here. I actually see that we can improve when it comes to understanding how sharing of failures contributes to learning and development.

Finally, *low status* was perceived as a barrier to sharing failure experiences. Especially, as a newcomer it was perceived to be more difficult to share failures:

If you are a newcomer, maybe it's harder. You are not used to share and don´t see the value. I try to encourage the newcomers to share more, probably I can do more of that.

In summary, failure sharing within Media Consultants was limited to small groups of trusted and compassionate peers. The main concern that stopped consultants from sharing their failure was a strong feeling that it may threaten and negatively impact the positive energy and success culture maintained in the organization. A second concern was a perception among consultants that sharing experiences of failure would negatively impact their image and thus their attractiveness on the internal labor market. However, there was some insight among the consultants that sharing experiences of failure could be an important enabler of learning and development – both personally and organizationally.

Case 2 - Leadership consultants

Background and structure

Leadership Consultants was founded in 1999 and with its approx. 60 associated consultants and a turnover of 70 MSkr, it is currently one of the largest Swedish leadership consultancies. The organization has grown rapidly in the past 5 years. The head office of Leadership consulting and most of the consultants are located in Stockholm but local branches have been established in Asia and other parts of Europe. The services offered focus on leadership and team development. The mission of Leadership development is to "set free the leader in all individuals to realize their full potential and thereby contribute to a better future for society". Services are delivered to both public and private organizations and vary largely in size – from providing a few coaching sessions to an individual manager involving a single consultant, to large

transformation programs for an entire organization involving a large team of consultants for more than a year.

Leadership Consultants is set up as a network of independent consultants. The typical recruit is an experienced and often high-profile individual with a background in management and sometimes HR in the public, private or voluntary sector. The consultants working under the "Leadership Consultants" brand all have their own companies and are responsible for generating their own income. This can be done by selling services externally to paying clients or internally helping colleagues deliver in larger assignments or engaging in internal management or development tasks. If consultants do not manage to sell their services, they will have no income. This implies that the consultants perceived that they were constantly acting on a market where they were judged and competed with their colleagues:

> *In our company, as consultant you have no salary - everything is up to you, which of course has an impact of how we behave. We are on an internal market, on which we are constantly evaluated in different ways. It can be extremely stressful, especially when you are a newcomer and not get included.*

Leadership Consultants has a simple formal structure with the local office being the main administrative unit. Key features of the management process include annual meetings between each consultant and the CEO and monthly company-wide meetings. In the annual meetings with the CEO, each consultant is to provide and agree with the CEO on their personal offer to the organization. This offer includes both the kind of assignments the consultant wants to work with as well as commitments regarding sales and delivery. These preferences are then meant to influence the staffing process, which is formally centralized based on three principles considered in the stated order: best for the client; best for the company; best for the individual consultant. In practice, however, staffing largely takes place in bilateral negotiations between project owners and consultants. A consequence of this is that the staffing process is not perceived as transparent. The monthly company-wide meetings bring together all the consultants and focus on developing the consultants professionally – by bringing in external input or sharing ideas and experiences from recent projects. The monthly meetings thus provide an opportunity to build a company-wide understanding of approaches and procedures and enact the organizational values. These values are formulated as presence and curiosity, generosity

and belief in the inherent power of all humans, growth and value creation, and courage and integrity.

Experience sharing

The overall impression from the interviews in Leadership Consultants is that experience sharing is an activity that is carefully reflected on by the consultants. Whether to share and with whom are perceived as important questions that are given considerable thought. This goes for both the sharing of perceived successes and failures.

Sharing experiences of success

The typical success that may be shared in Leadership Consultants is related to commercial aspects such as selling a big assignment to a prestigious client or to a successful delivery in which a client was perceived as highly satisfied. The analysis of the interviewees' examples of sharing (and not sharing) success experiences revealed a number of enablers as well as barriers. (see table 3)

Enablers of sharing success experiences	Barriers to sharing success experiences
- Trustful and compassionate relationships - Requests for sharing	- Fear to be perceived as bragging - Perceived lack of interest - Internal competition and judgement

Table 3. Enablers and barriers of sharing success experiences in Leadership Consultants

The sharing of success experiences typically takes place in a small group of individuals and seldom reaches the level of the entire organization. Characteristic of these contexts is that individuals feel that they are based on a trustful and compassionate relationship:

> *In a compassionate and trustful context, I can share personal success with those peers who are present in that situation.*

> *For me in terms of experience sharing of a success, it happens mostly face-to face with 2-4 peers.*

Often, the sharing of experiences of success to a wider audience is triggered by an active *request* rather than the individuals' willingness and urge to share:

Once, I and a colleague shared a customer assignment that went well. We were asked to share the experience at a formal company meeting that takes place every third month. At this kind of meeting, all consultants are invited. The people responsible for the meeting wanted us to share since the customer assignment had expanded over time and several consultants had heard about it. They wanted us to share how we had managed to create a successful customer assignment.

In addition to these enablers of the sharing of successes, the interviews also pointed at several *barriers*. These were closely related to concerns about how sharing would influence the consultants' image among peers and they reflected in detail on what to say and what not, often leading to a high level of self-censorship. The first, and most often mentioned barrier was the consultants' *fear to be perceived as bragging:*

***Interviewer: How did it feel to be asked to share a success?** It should be great fun, but in this case, I felt I shouldn´t glorify it too much. Rather, keep it on a reasonable level and be objective. Clearly, it was fun to be asked and be confirmed. But also, avoid to assert oneself was essential – in our culture you must balance this. Namely, not be too much. I shared with my peers at a company meeting recently. Before doing that, I carefully considered what to share and what not to share. Not to glorify myself was important. But afterwards it felt a bit scary - did I exalt myself too much? Did I forget someone? Did I step on someone's toes?*

Did I accomplish something special? Is this a success, really? My own thoughts are the biggest barrier.

A second barrier was a *perceived lack of interest* from colleagues, which made consultants reconsider whether to share:

I cannot tell if anybody is interested in hearing my experiences.

They, my peers, are not curious enough. When I shared a positive customer feedback, I received no response at all from my peers. That's why I do not continue to share. The recipient must show interest.

Given the lack of interest, and the risk of being perceived as bragging, consultants often played it safe and chose not to share in order not to risk their image on the internal labor market. Because of the structural set-up of the organization, consultants felt that they were acting on a market on which *competition and judgement* were key aspects. Rather than being an opportunity for learning, success sharing was understood in the context of image-building and positioning:

> *Me and a colleague shared an experience of success regarding a customer assignment, but when sharing it didn´t feel good. I missed a curious response, and my peers didn´t want to know more. Rather it was a competitive experience. Although I didn´t experience actual envy, I perceived competitiveness.*

> *A kind of insecurity what's okay and not okay. It´s probably insecurity: if I´m good enough, if I´m too much, or just okay as I am? May anyone disparage me. If we could work with this insecurity it would be helpful. It is also connected to our performance-anxiety.*

To summarize, sharing experiences in "Leadership Consultants" was perceived as rather problematic by consultants, as soon as it went beyond the established and trust-based relationships of the individual consultant. Sharing experiences of success was perceived as a risk to the consultants' image on the internal labor market and thus carefully thought through – and limited in order not to take unnecessary risks.

Sharing experiences of failure

The sharing of experiences of failure was to a larger extent than the sharing of experiences of success described as an emotional experience. Emotions mentioned in the interviews included disappointment, self-criticism and guilt. Two enablers and three barriers to the sharing of failure experiences were recurrently mentioned (see table 4).

Enablers of sharing failure experiences	Barriers to sharing failure experiences
• Trustful and compassionate relationships • Others sharing	• Internal competition and judgement • Strong ideals and high ambitions • Lack of formal arenas

Table 4. Enablers and barriers of sharing failure experiences in Leadership Consultants

Those sharing experiences of failures reported mixed reactions from their peers. While some reported that they received supportive and constructive reactions, a recurring feeling was also a lack of response. Consultants wanting to discuss experiences of less successful events or get feedback on their behaviors felt they were met with a lack of interest:

> *I have booked meetings with some peers to get feedback. I´m concerned why I don´t receive any feedback. They were silent, and I don´t know why.*

The main *enabler* of sharing experiences of failures was, as in the case of experiences of success, the existence of *trustful and compassionate relationships*. All the sharing of failure experiences took place in the context of these relationships. Consultants typically had such relationships with a couple of individuals, which they had built during their careers at Leadership Consultants. Previous and repeated collaboration in projects was a common source of these relations:

> *I share my failures with those I feel trust and compassion. In that context, I can raise questions – there are a handful of individuals I can share with.*

> *Most often, I share with a single person which I trust. Sharing failures in larger groups rarely happens.*

Also contributing to the willingness to share experiences of success was that *others shared such experiences*. This contributed to a more open atmosphere, and some, typically more senior consultants, consciously shared their experiences of failures as a way to encourage others to do so:

> *[It is easier to share failures] when peers dare to be open and share their failures and shortcomings. When they are honest and share that our work can be extremely challenging and complex.*

> *I'm not an odd bird, but I'm probably someone who goes in the forefront. I have nothing to lose, but I believe when sharing my failures I contribute to something important.*

The main *barrier* to sharing failures is the internal *competition and judgement* that is constantly perceived by the consultants. As they are acting on an internal labor market they are very

concerned with how they are perceived by their peers. The main fear is to gain a negative reputation and thus not be chosen for future projects:

> *I am highly dependent on other people's perception of me as a competent and attractive consultant. Our internal market is extremely important. My knowledge and skills can easily disappear among 50-60 peers.*

> *If I share a failure it may be passed on to others, it´s a feeling that I am judged. Some individuals I do not trust. The people I trust have been open with their shortcomings or showing me their vulnerability. I usually share failures, but it has hit back negatively on myself, unfortunately.*

An interesting aspect of Leadership consulting is that the kind of judgmental behavior felt by most consultants conflicts with one of the strongest company values namely generosity, which is recurrently pointed out in the interviews:

> *I feel we do not share our failures, since the consequence can be not to be selected. We are judged and evaluated, which completely goes against our values – openness and generosity. We fail to live our values.*

These aspects of how to relate to each other and how to build a culture that makes all its members thrive and develop is a key aspect of Leadership Consultants' professional competence and what it offers its clients. While this may be expected to be an enabler of failure sharing, in the current case it was mainly described as a liability as the *strong ideals and high ambitions* hindered that the obvious discrepancies between the observed reality and the cultural ideals were addressed. Insights into the hard work that would be required to "live" the culture, fears of what might come up if one started to live the culture and a view that the internal issues may be an indication of a lack of professional competence were strong barriers to addressing the lack of failure sharing:

> *We put more energy into our external client relationships than into our internal ones. We don´t act in internal conversations the way we train our clients. We do not give ourselves enough time to get to know each other. It's interesting when you have knowledge you do not use to help yourself.*

Interviewer: Could it even be a barrier to have these insights?
Yes, it can. If we know how much work and energy it takes to improve, it can stop us from starting that process. If I have limited resources and time, I realize that it will require less focus on clients. If we become more aware of what is actually going on in our company, we may get scared. Then I might realize that truly I should be somewhere else since how we behave is contrary to our deeper values. A lot of shame and guilt can arise when people realize they are in the wrong place.

Some consultants think we should operate much better than we actually do. Everything that´s not working well internally is interpreted as "How should we be able to support a client if we don´t manage it ourselves?". It can be a barrier to us. I mean that we are better at managing successes or failures with clients externally, while these are harder for us to cope with internally creating barriers to many consultants. We tend to talk about it, instead of taking care of it. We are very ambitious with high demands and expectations on ourselves, which creates anxiety.

Finally, a *lack of formal arenas* for sharing failure experiences beyond the small group of trusted peers was mentioned as a barrier. Consultants wishing to share experiences of failures and discuss learnings from these felt there were limited opportunities and arenas to do so:

Unfortunately, we lack routines or processes for sharing failures, which means that there will be no collective learning - only for a minority of us.

Formal arenas are not available. The type of arenas where experiences of failure can be reflected upon. Also, I experience some negative aspects embedded in our structure, for example that I as an individual consultant is self-employed and it is up to me to identify and search for valuable experiences within the organization. We have a concept meaning that everyone should be pro-active and seek knowledge actively, but it can hinder us from setting up formal arenas for experience sharing.

Taken together, failure sharing within Leadership Consultants was very limited beyond small groups of trusted peers. The main concern that hindered consultants from sharing their failures

was a strong fear that this may negatively impact their image and thus their attractiveness on the internal labor market. The fact that building an open and supportive culture was part of the consultants' professional competence further complicated addressing issues related to failure sharing as any actions related to this might impact the image of the consultants' professionalism among peers.

Discussion and conclusions

Experiences made in projects with clients are a key source of learning and innovation in professional service firms (Werr & Stjernberg, 2003; Sarvary 1999). In order to be able to exploit these experiences for learning, they need to be shared and become subject to collective analysis and discussion (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). While previous research on organizational learning and knowledge sharing has studied the sharing of knowledge, the preceding sharing of experiences – as a basis for the creation of knowledge, has received less attention. This motivates the current paper's focus on this specific aspect of the knowledge development process in organizations.

Based on the two case studies above, a number of enablers and barriers to the sharing of failure and success experiences respectively are identified (see figure 1 for a summary).

	Enablers	**Barriers**
Success Sharing	**Media Consultants** • Success culture • Formal arenas **Leadership Consultants** • Trustful and compassionate relationships • Requests for sharing	**Media Consultants** • Fear to be perceived as bragging • Lack of time **Leadership Consultants** • Fear to be perceived as bragging • Perceived lack of interest • Internal competition and judgement

Failure Sharing	**Media Consultants** • Trustful and compassionate relationships • Improvement focus • Feedback culture • Formal arenas • High status **Leadership Consultants** • Trustful and compassionate relationships • Others sharing	**Media Consultants** • Success culture • Internal competition • Lack of time • Lack of processes and know-how • Low status **Leadership Consultants** • Internal competition and judgement • Strong ideals and high ambitions • Lack of formal arenas

Figure 1. Enablers and barriers to failure sharing in the two cases

The overview of enablers and barriers indicates that partly different factors are in play when it comes to the sharing of failures as compared to successes. These are linked to different emotional reactions. The sharing of experiences of failure was to a larger extent than the sharing of experiences of successes described as a negative emotional experience. Emotions related to the sharing of failures mentioned in the study included disappointment, self-criticism, guilt and shame. The differences in emotional reactions were reported in both companies. This supports the findings in past research indicating that emotional reactions connected to failure experiences may trigger specific mechanisms enabling and limiting their sharing (Zhao, 2011; Shepherd, 2003; Huy, 1999; Catino & Patriotta, 2013). Overall, however, trustful and compassionate relationships stand out as a key enabler, which is to be understood in relation to the key barrier, which is internal competition and a fear of being judged leading to a strong concern with the consultants' image among peers. In the following, we will discuss three themes that derive from the comparison of the two cases – the importance of the consultants' image in driving considerations of experience sharing, the influence of the character of the knowledge base and the importance of clear norms that are supportive of knowledge sharing and enforced by organizational structures and practices.

A key theme in the interviews with the consultants regarding their decision to share experiences was the importance of how sharing would influence their image among their peers. In both the cases, sharing decisions were made largely based on reflections on how these would affect the consultants' image among peers. This was true not only for failure experiences but also for experiences of success, especially in Leadership Consultants. This indicates that communication between consultants within PSFs is set within considerations of image effects.

The importance of "image" in the consultants' reflections on whether to share knowledge is closely related to the staffing process, which in both cases (although in Leadership Consultants more than in Media Consultants) was described as an internal, competitive labor market. On this market, consultants had to make themselves attractive to their colleagues in order to secure their income (Leadership Consultants) or reach their utilization targets (Media Consultants). The larger the stake on the labor market, the stronger the concern as reflected in the stronger concerns in Leadership Consultants where the entire income of the consultants was dependent on the outcome of the labor market. This confirms the findings of previous research (Ferrin & Dirks, 2003; Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Weiss, 1999) that has pointed out the negative effects of individual performance measures, such as utilization rate, on knowledge sharing, but also ads to this research by identifying image concerns as the main reason. Previous research has understood the link mainly in terms of a lack of incentives to share knowledge.

A second theme is related to the importance of the organizational knowledge base as an enabler or barrier to experience sharing. The two cases point at two aspects of the knowledge base – its clarity (to what extent is it shared and clear to the consultants in the organization) and its content (how is the knowledge base related to key issues of collaboration, organizational culture, leadership, etc.).

In relation to the clarity of the knowledge base, we observed that concerns regarding what may be a contribution to colleagues' knowledge and what may not be, were a key barrier to the sharing of especially success experiences in Leadership Consultants. The fear of being perceived as bragging, pointing out the obvious was strong. Such concerns were less salient in Media Consultants. This may be understood in terms of the more unclear and multifaceted knowledge base in Leadership consultants, where hiring focused on experienced individuals which had their own toolboxes. The consultants thus had a limited shared knowledge base to which they could relate their judgments of what may be additions to knowledge and what not. This echoes the importance of shared methods and tools as a basis for knowledge sharing (Werr & Stjernberg) but also adds to this literature by showing how this effects not only the ability to share knowledge but also the willingness to do so.

Regarding the content of the knowledge base and its relation to experience sharing, the cases show a difference, where, somewhat surprisingly, consulting expertise in the areas of building inclusive, tolerant and encouraging cultures and organizations became a barrier to creating these

kinds of enablers for experience sharing. Looking at the values and service portfolio of Leadership Consultants, they include key aspects of how to build contexts where individuals feel safe, valued and included. The perceptions of working in Leadership Consultants, however was the opposite. This discrepancy between ideal and practice was hard for Leadership Consultants to deal with, and the interviews indicate that this was linked to the fact that the ideal was so close to the "raison d'être" of Leadership Consultants and the professional competence of the consultants. Given their self-understanding as experts within the area of building trustful organizations, their current organizational reality became related to strong feelings of guilt and shame, which created strong incentives not to openly address the issue. That consultants are typically bad at practicing what they preach has been pointed out earlier. The current study, however, indicates mechanisms of shame and guilt as part of the explanation of why this may be the case.

Third, the current study points at the importance of organizational norms. The above cases indicate that two aspects of these norms may influence experience sharing – the clarity of the norms and the content and coherence between norms and organizational structures and procedures. The clarity of norms is related to the professionals' concern with their image. Given this concern, they are very reluctant to break organizational norms. As indicated in the case of Media Consultants, the existence of strong norms concerning experience-sharing behavior (as was the case in relation to the sharing of successes and to some extent also failures) was a strong enabler. In the case of Leadership Consultants, such clear norms were lacking, which instead was a strong barrier to experience sharing. Given the high stakes involved in a hurt reputation from breaking norms, consultants minimized their risks by sharing as little as possible. In the case of Leadership Consultants, this created what may be characterized as a "silence culture". This indicates the importance of clear norms in organizations where professionals' reputation is a strong concern. The absence of such norms risks being highly passivizing. The importance of "normative control" in Professional service firms has been discussed earlier as a way to guide and direct professionals' behaviors (e.g. Alvesson, 2004). The current study indicates that the absence of such norms does not only mean a lack of direction – and thus a potential diversity of behaviors – but may rather lead to an avoidance of behavior altogether and thus create passivity.

But, it is not only the lack of clear norms that may influence experience sharing, but also the content of the norms and the coherence between the norms and the organizational structures

and procedures. In order to create norms that are perceived as clear and supportive of experience sharing, norms need to encourage sharing and organizational structures and practices need to be aligned with this, because in the case of misalignment, the practices and the norms these reflect will gain dominance over any espoused and explicitly communicated values. This is illustrated by the case of Leadership Consultants where the espoused values emphasize openness, respect and care of colleagues while the organizational procedures, with the strong focus on individual profitability, signal values of individualism and egoism. The self-employment model of Leadership Consultants encourages a behavior where the consultants focus more on their own benefits than on the benefits of others and thus limit their engagement in experience sharing. This confirms the findings of previous research that has pointed out that an organizational climate (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005) and/or an organizational structure (Kim & Lee, 2006; Tagliaventi & Mattarelli, 2006), which emphasizes individual competition and hinders sharing. It also confirms previous research that identified considerable barriers to knowledge sharing in non-supportive work environments (Edmondson, 1996).

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