KEEP CALM AND LEARN FROM FAILURE

DOGWOOD initiative

2011/2012 Failures Report

"Occasionally success is achieved on the first try, but more often, it requires a process of failing forward — it's how we got the light bulb, the Model T and just about everything we now accept as a successful innovation. All of these required risk tolerance, a desire to innovate and transparency in sharing results."

admittingfailure.com

2011/2012 Failures Report

Failing Forward

At Dogwood Initiative, we believe changing the world isn't possible without taking risks and innovating – which inevitably means failing sometimes.

We also believe it's important to share these failures, to allow others to glean lessons from our mistakes and to contribute to building a culture within the NGO sector that encourages creativity and calculated risk-taking.

If we are going to make the advances required to solve some of the world's largest problems, it's going to require going out on a limb and collectively learning from the times when things go wrong. For us, that process begins with the publication of our first *Failing Forward Report*.

Will Horter
Executive Director

Why admit failure?

A few years ago two separate events at Hollyhock retreat centre on Cortes Island got me thinking about the importance of publicly disclosing failure.

The first happened at the Social Venture Institute. I went for the networking opportunity, but was skeptical about what I would have in common with the entrepreneurs who make up the majority of the attendees.

I was pleasantly surprised by the "can do" attitude of attendees and was thoroughly blown away by the candid discussion of failure, which is largely absent from NGO sector gatherings. I particularly remember the keynote speech in which Jeffery Hollender, the charismatic CEO of the eco-friendly home products company Seventh Generation, explained how he had nearly taken his company into bankruptcy before turning the ship around. He was candid, articulate and frank about his own mistakes and what he learned from them. It was an inspiring conference and I learned a lot more than I anticipated, mostly because people were so open about sharing their failures.

A few months later at the Social Change Institute, Green for All founder Van Jones came back to the failure theme in his keynote. Speaking to a room full of NGO leaders he said something along the lines of:

"If you read all of our funding reports, you would think everything is great in the world. You would think we are nearing a 100 per cent success rate. You would think the world had no environmental degradation, less poverty, more happiness. But that is a lie. Things are not getting better; they are getting worse on virtually every important indicator. And the funding process that pushes all of us to say otherwise diminishes us. We are lying to our donors, to our supporters and most importantly to ourselves…and we are weaker because of it."

If you know how eloquently Van Jones speaks you know I'm paraphrasing, but his point has been percolating in my mind ever since. In NGOs, particularly environmental groups, narratives of near total success — what I call "heroic" stories — are actually getting in the way of the learning necessary to ultimately succeed. Too often we dust off and redeploy strategies and tactics that didn't really work the first time. All we have to do is look at the statistics on public participation and environmental indicators to know we are going backwards, not forwards. Why can't we just say so?

Since attending those conferences, I have been trying to figure out what steps Dogwood Initiative could take to change our relationship with failure. We had already committed to becoming a data-driven organization, so we began implementing systems to measure our actions against our goals, to set baselines and to figure out how to test variables and measure results.

Since our ultimate success depends on inspiring people to step outside their comfort zones and take action, we started studying and discussing the latest in neuroscience and behavioural economics and we initiated pilots to test our assumptions about what would work best.

It wasn't rocket science; in fact, the process of moving from concept to innovation is simple. It involves the constant interplay between piloting an idea, measuring results, figuring out what worked and what failed, adapting and redeploying and eventually scaling the innovations that work. Reboot and try again.

This approach is rare in the NGO sector today. At Dogwood, our culture of embracing failure is evolving. In 2011, for the first time, we decided to publicly report on our biggest failures of the year. Ironically, since the resulting report took so long to finalize (our first failure of 2012!) we decided to delay the report and disclose two years of failures in this our first *Failing Forward Report*.

What will admitting failures accomplish?

As you read about our failures, remember: reporting on failures is not an end in itself. It is a process.

We hope to accomplish three things:

1   Enhance an organizational culture of failing fast and learning from it;

2   Catalyze more frank discussion of failure between NGOs and amongst funders; and

3   Build transparency and trust with our supporters.

Dogwood Initiative is disclosing our failures to open a dialogue both internally and externally. We hope to keep ourselves open to learning and testing our assumptions while always striving for a quicker, cheaper, more effective means to create systemic change on the important issues affecting British Columbians.

We also hope by sharing our experiences publicly, other NGOs will follow suit, slowly creating a more transparent dialogue both amongst our colleagues and amongst our collective funders.

Given our past experience with admitting failure, we hope a more systematic confession will further strengthen our connection with our supporters. In this age of spin it is rare for anyone to admit failure.

This diminishes us and creates cynicism. We hope to breakthrough this cynicism with this report.

Given the increasingly divisive political culture in Canada today, we are not publishing this report without concern it will be used against us, but it is a risk we are willing to take —only time will tell whether it was useful.

Creating a culture of innovation is the only option we see for creating change at the scale and pace needed. Dogwood Initiative will continue to fail – if we don't, we aren't trying hard enough. By sharing what didn't work, we hope to accelerate the process of finding out what does.

> **"**I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.**"**
> - Michael Jordan

#failures in 2012

Failure 1: Inadequate fact-checking before launching coal ads and calls

Goal: To raise awareness about Port Metro Vancouver's plans to expand coal exports

In 2011, Dogwood began preparing to launch a new campaign against the massive expansion of coal exports from B.C. ports. We developed an initial strategy, identified partners and began seeking financial support with the intent of launching the campaign in early 2013. Unfortunately, in the second half of 2012 Port Metro Vancouver announced two projects — one to expand coal exports from the Neptune Terminal in North Vancouver and another to add a new train-barge coal transfer facility at Fraser-Surrey Docks.

Despite claims by Port Metro Vancouver that extensive "consultation" had taken place, hardly anyone in the neighbouring communities was aware of the proposals. At the last minute, just before Christmas, we raised some money to take out newspaper ads in five communities impacted by the proposals as well as to conduct automated interactive telephone calls in these same neighbourhoods.

Booking the ads, getting them designed, arranging the logistics for the calls as well as recruiting a public health doctor to voice the calls was a significant undertaking. Also, at the last minute we decided to create individual ads and scripts customized to each community instead of using the same ad and script in all areas.

Under tight time pressure, our Executive Director overlooked fact-checking an important piece of information in the ads and the phone script. As such, our messages incorrectly stated a new coal terminal was being proposed at the Neptune terminal, when in reality what was being proposed was an expansion of the loading infrastructure at the existing facility.

Port Metro Vancouver spokespeople, the coal industry and their supporters exploited this mistake to discredit the 400 Dogwood Initiative supporters who sent the port letters of concern.

The media also seized on this mistake, making it, instead of the coal port expansion, the main story. For example, the North Shore News ran a number of stories quoting Neptune's spokesperson complaining about "misleading information." The mistake opened the door for coal industry spokespeople to give distorted point-by-point responses to our claims about trains, health impacts, coal dust and global warming.

What we learned
Fact check everything! Regardless of how crunched for time we may be or how many other tasks we may have on our plate, there is no excuse for not double-checking the facts. Our credibility is too hard-earned to be put at risk by not doing our due diligence.

Going forward, what has changed?
The onus is on the creator of fresh copy to ensure all facts are correct. When in doubt, editors fact check, but given staffing limits, it's unrealistic for editors to re-check every fact in a piece of copy. This incident has been a reminder about the importance of being diligent about only introducing factually accurate copy.

Failure 2: Failing to consider and prepare for the negative spin after the Union of B.C. Municipalities vote

Goal: To get the UBCM to pass a resolution opposing the expansion of crude oil tankers in B.C.

Some of the champions who helped pass No Tankers resolution A8 at the Union of B.C. Municipalities convention (from left to right): Saanich Councillor Dean Murdock, Smithers Mayor Taylor Bachrach, Prince Rupert Councillor Jennifer Rice and Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson.

The Union of B.C. Municipalities represents municipal and regional governments in British Columbia and is an important force on the B.C. political scene.

For the last few years we have had success — working in co-ordination with our municipal, NGO and First Nations partners – passing resolutions related to both Enbridge and Kinder Morgan's oil tanker proposals. Previously, these resolutions passed handily.

Given the high profile of oil tanker proposals and the strong community and municipal support built in 2012 we decided to organize support for the gold standard in UBCM tanker resolutions. The resolution opposed all projects that "would lead to the expansion of oil tanker traffic through B.C.'s coastal waters."

Through a lot of hard work, UBCM delegates endorsed the resolution by what some media described as a "razor thin" margin: 52.5 per cent to 47.5 per cent.

Unfortunately, we failed to anticipate the way the story would play out in the media. The closeness of the vote became the story, rather than the groundbreaking nature of the resolution. Instead of stories about how B.C. municipal representatives strongly oppose all future oil tanker related projects, the media generally highlighted the slim victory. CBC, quoting a broadly circulated Canadian Press story, led with the resolution passing "only by the narrowest of margins."

Frankly, we didn't prepare for the possibility a razor-thin vote would itself become the story, burying the coverage of the "strongest ever" No Tankers resolution successfully passed in B.C. As a result we were not able to maximize the impact of this resolution.

RESOLUTION A8: OIL TANKER TRAFFIC (Saanich)

WHEREAS a crude oil spill would have devastating and long lasting effects on British Columbia's unique and diverse coast, which provides critical marine habitat and marine resources that sustain the social, cultural, environmental and economic health of coastal and First Nations communities;

AND WHEREAS citizens of British Columbia, particularly those living in coastal communities, and First Nations communities and environmental groups have expressed well founded concerns over the expansion of oil pipelines and oil tankers:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that UBCM oppose projects that would lead to the expansion of oil tanker traffic through BC's coastal waters;

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that UBCM urge the Premier of British Columbia, the Leader of the Official Opposition and members of the Legislative Assembly to use whatever legislative and administrative means that are available to stop the expansion of oil tanker traffic through BC' s coastal waters.

What we learned
Sometimes as major decisions or events approach, we fail to prepare thoroughly considered messaging for a breadth of possible outcomes. This emphasizes the need to always consider alternative scenarios even if they seem like long shots.

Going forward, what has changed?
This experience, combined with our experience in the 2011 federal election (See page 14), remind us of the importance of planning for every outcome and to prepare responses accordingly well ahead of time.

For the 2013 provincial election we prepared media statements and supporter e-mails for either an NDP or Liberal win. When the B.C. Liberal's unexpected victory was announced we were able to send out our statement almost immediately and, as a result, were one of the few groups quoted in the first media cycle.

This confirms the little bit of time it takes to consider alternative scenarios is well worth the effort.

Failure 3: Communications failures with supporters

Goal: To effectively communicate with supporters while being sensitive to their wishes

Although Dogwood Initiative is earning a hard-earned reputation for data-driven, segmented, values-focused communications with our supporters, it's still a struggle to fully engage our supporters in ways that respect their wishes.

We have made progress, but if we are to fully capture the best our supporters have to offer, continued improvement is essential. Specifically here are some areas where we'd like to improve.

- **Not Enough Individualized Engagement**
  Last year, we relied too much on one-size-fits-all online actions and struggled to consistently create bite-sized, geographically focused No Tankers engagement activities. History shows the more localized and individualized tactions are, the higher the response rates and engagement levels. However, it takes a lot of time to tailor communications and we weren't able to dedicate the time required to deconstruct options for potential actions to make them more personally and geographically relevant to individual supporters.

- **Find Allies Follow-up**
  After the release of our Find Allies kit last year dozens of supporters stepped up and did amazing work bringing their friends and neighbours into the No Tankers movement by getting them to sign the petition. Many folks, including Sharon Farinha, Diana Caldwell, Carol Ann Collins and Barbara Kohlman, sent in hundreds of petition signatures. One amazing woman, Wanda Best, gathered 1,500 signatures alone. We were inspired. These amazing volunteers are the foundation of our new citizen-driven organizing model, but we left them adrift after they completed the kit. We failed to adequately follow-up with them, to celebrate their amazing work and to work with them to develop the next step in their journey. If we are going to succeed in creating a decentralized, citizen-driven movement we need to dedicate more attention to our highest engagement supporters.

What we learned

We need to prioritize our personal interactions with key supporters and volunteers, better investigate their preferences for communications and improve our technology for tracking supporters' desires.

It's not sexy, but to do so we need an improved system of "subscription management," which allows us to tailor our messages and channels of communication to match individual preferences. This requires the ability for supporters to select the frequency, medium and content of communications they receive from us. For example, a supporter might want to receive our e-newsletter on a regular basis, but only be asked for financial support by mail, and only once a year.

Unfortunately, our database for supporter records currently doesn't have adequate tools to keep track of supporters' preferences.

To remedy this we need to improve our database to make it easy to customize individual records to control the channels of communications and also to segment our audience using a variety of criteria such as geography, interest, engagement history and donation history. We can then tailor messages to best fit a segment and send the message to each individual through their preferred channel.

Going forward, what has changed?

This year we will be conducting research into who our supporters are, what they are interested in, how they want to be communicated with (and how they don't) as well as how to break down barriers to better, more personal engagement.

Dogwood Initiative is also dedicating resources to improving our database to better capture our supporters' communications preferences.

Photo courtesy of Evan Leeson.
flickr.com/photos/ecstaticist

Failure 4: Not putting enough pressure on political parties regarding Kinder Morgan's tanker and pipeline proposal

Goal: To ensure the B.C. government opposes Kinder Morgan

In 2011 Dogwood Initiative began to campaign more aggressively against Kinder Morgan's proposal to expand its pipeline to Vancouver, which could result in 400 oil tankers a year travelling through Vancouver Harbour, past Stanley Park, and through the Juan de Fuca Strait en route to Asian markets.

While the external context evolved, a number of factors were also influencing our organization internally. After a nationwide setback in the 2011 federal election and a huge surge in support following Natural Resource Minister Joe Oliver's attacks characterizing environmentalist as radicals, we decided we had to significantly change our approach to engagement and move to a more decentralized, citizen-driven model — both to keep up with demand and to have more impact.

This involved a significant rethinking of how we engaged supporters and led to the development of two kits – Find Allies and Find Leaders – to help guide volunteer efforts. Developing the kits took much longer than anticipated in 2012 (See our Project Management failure discussed on page 10), requiring a significant investment of staff time, taking resources that we could have used to put more individual pressure on the B.C. Liberals and NDP before the end of 2012.

This is not to say we did nothing to raise the profile of Kinder Morgan or to pressure the B.C. Liberals and B.C. NDP to oppose Kinder Morgan's proposal. In fact, in partnership with LeadNow, our staff helped volunteers co-ordinate 72 Defend Our Coast rallies at MLA offices across the province.

That said, we sacrificed efforts to maximize the pressure on the political parties in 2012 to build a stronger foundation for citizen-led action in the future.

We failed to achieve the right balance between these objectives so as to increase the potential that one or both parties would oppose the project well in advance of the May 2013 provincial election.

What we learned

Citizen engagement happens by doing, not by perfect planning. We spent too much time trying to chart an effective tactical course for our volunteers and not enough on basic leadership development, which should always come first.

Going forward, what has changed?

This will be much easier now that we have the benefit of a comprehensive set of tools and tactics that our supporters can wield to advance campaigns. However, the long-term culture of the organization has shifted such that staff will now concentrate first and foremost on continually, personally and intensively developing long-term leadership within our network of supporters.

Failure 5: Project Management: underestimating the time and resources necessary to launch new projects

Goal: Strengthen Dogwood Initiative by reducing office costs, creating a transparent culture that embraces failure and helps other groups while engaging citizens on emerging issues using decentralized tools

Dogwood Initiative grew rapidly in the last few years, increasing our staff from three to 13. This growth strained our administrative systems and pressed us to expedite projects we believed would strengthen the organization long-term earlier than anticipated. When launching new projects, we consistently underestimated the time and resources each of these projects would entail. Simply put, we took on too many new projects simultaneously with too few resources.

Related to the number of side projects was our failure to assign a project lead to manage these projects. Dogwood Initiative is a relatively flat organization, with overlapping and interconnected responsibilities for most staff. We consciously have broken down traditional silos that separate fundraising, communications and campaigns, integrating some of these responsibilities amongst almost all staff. We believe this overlap and duplication has benefited Dogwood, helping us to better focus and strengthen our connection to our supporters. However, extending this multi-staff responsibility approach to managing new projects failed. Too many staff working off the side of their desks on too many projects caused delays and reduced efficiencies.

In addition to taking on too many projects and not identifying project leads, each of the following discretionary projects stressed our systems and had their own unique failures and lessons learned. These are detailed below:

1 **Securing long-term office space at lesser cost**
Having faced a 400 per cent increase in rent when we moved to new offices in 2011, we were worried our new landlord would increase our rent when our current lease expired in 2013. So when two partners approached us with an opportunity to purchase a building that could suit our needs, we went ahead even though the timing was not ideal. Given the intensity of the No Tankers campaign and the plethora of other non-essential projects (see below) we were already stretched too thin. Creating a new partnership to own the building, dealing with City of Victoria to get the lot rezoned and plans permitted and engaging with the bank to secure financing, all took much longer than anticipated with a number of staff having to handle various aspects off the side of their desks. These efforts caused upgrades to our IT systems and database — core functions for the organization — to get less attention than they required while delaying the implementation of some upgrades and improvements.

2 **Publishing our first Failing Forward Report**
Although difficult, the process to discuss and collectively agree upon our biggest failures of 2011 was productive in helping to establish an organizational culture willing to look in the mirror and frankly discuss failure. Unfortunately, we failed to execute all the steps required to complete the process and publish the initial report in a timely manner. Any failures report, but particularly an organization's initial report, will take hours of internal discussion. As with other project management failures described in this section we failed to understand the time it would take and budget the resources necessary to complete and publish the report.

3 **Expanding our social enterprise Popular Change**
Last year we began to see an increase in requests from small and large groups to help them on their campaigns. For example, groups fighting the Site C dam and local groups fighting coal mines wanted Dogwood to join their campaigns, as did groups concerned about port, power line and marina expansions. These requests escalated just as we were trying to increase our focus on our existing campaigns. We felt guilty saying "no" and wanted to find a way to help.

At around the same time, the communication, database and supporter engagement systems Dogwood Initiative had spent so many years developing started producing great results. Many groups began approaching us asking for advice in implementing similar systems for their own organizations. This was exciting. We know we can't move the needle on big issues without help from other groups also dedicated to becoming more proficient at organizing concerned British Columbians. Having been encouraged by funders to examine our core competencies and see if any could be monetized, we decided to launch Popular Change, a sister organization that would make Dogwood's communication, database and strategic expertise available to interested groups at reasonable rates. We still think that was a good idea, but our failure was underestimating the time it would take to service clients, while simultaneously building the new organization. Popular Change also failed to communicate to clients regarding the need for adequate notice and its fee structure didn't discourage last-minute client requests, which occasionally interfered with Dogwood Initiative's other work[1].

4 **Launching a coal campaign**
Our *B.C.'s Dirty Secret: Big Coal and the Export of Global Warming* report in 2011 clued us in to the growing size of the B.C. coal industry and we began seeking resources to develop and launch a coal campaign. The demands of the No Tankers campaign convinced us to commit to delaying the launch of the coal campaign until we had sufficient resources to hire a full-time coal campaign director. We failed to abide by this decision when Port Metro Vancouver announced plans to expand their coal export facilities. Despite not having funding for dedicated coal staff we jumped into the campaign with our Executive Director taking on responsibility for responding to the proposed coal port expansions. This was a mistake, which led to additional mistakes (See section on fact checking failure on page 4). Both the Executive Director and our Communications team were stretched and weren't able to respond with the intensity and professionalism we expect from ourselves.

5 **Developing and implementing offline citizen organizing tool kits and digital platforms to decentralize our organizing model**
One of our biggest failures of 2012 was the amount of time spent developing kits and online platforms — Find Allies, Find Leaders (digital and paper), and the digital platform used by No Tankers organizers during the election. The intent was good – to creates kits that would allow concerned citizens to better self-organize their friends and neighbours. But the amount of time required to complete these projects was vastly underestimated and they sucked up too much time and resources. Long-term these kits and online platforms will be the foundations for our decentralized citizen-driven organizing model, but in the short-term it distracted key campaign and communications staff from campaigning.

What we learned

We learned to be more deliberate in our decision-making and to communicate better internally about projects. Going forward Dogwood Initiative has to be much more rigorous when deciding whether or not to embark on non-core projects. Also, every major project needs a Project Manager to lead it with sufficient time allocated in their annual work plan to do the project justice. This may require existing responsibilities to be shuffled or dispensed with or require the need for additional staff or consultants.

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[1] The demise of our long-time consultant Groundwire was a double whammy, increasing the demand for Popular Change's services (which quickly exceeded the organization's capacity), while also unexpectedly burdening Dogwood Initiative staff with tasks previously executed by the consultants.

Dogwood Initiative may continue to embark on side projects that are not essential to current programs, but may have longer term benefits, but our process for making these decisions needs to be more transparent and intentional. Through the Failing Forward Report process we discovered that in the past some senior staff had serious misgivings about various projects listed above — however their misgivings were overridden by the enthusiasm of other senior staff.

With Popular Change we quickly learned client services could not be met with seconded Dogwood Initiative staff and Popular Change needed its own dedicated staff. Popular Change also needed to figure out how to recover its costs for scoping and advice, as we were spending hours helping potential clients think through their challenges only to have them decide not to pursue a contract or to hire another consultant. In retrospect, perhaps we should have delayed the launch of Popular Change until we had secured the resources to hire someone full-time.

The same is true for launching new campaigns like the coal campaign: no program lead, no launch.

Going Forward, What Has Changed?

At its essence success, in changing the world for the better is about relationships. To continue to improve our ability to be a powerful change agent Dogwood Initiative needs to improve internal communications and decision-making as well as deepen our relationships with supporters. This is hard work. There are no shortcuts, so beginning in 2013 Dogwood Initiative has rededicated itself to working through our internal communications systems and practices to better align staff on key priorities and prioritize internal and external relationships.

In the future we will spend more time evaluating the costs and benefits of each new project, with particular attention to – and less aspirational assessments of – the actual staff or consultant time and resources necessary to complete the project.

We have modified our annual planning process to allocate only 85 to 90 per cent of each staff person's time for existing responsibilities. We will consciously budget in white space for each staff member to create space for unanticipated but important projects, without taking away from existing duties. If a project will take more time then is left unallocated, Senior Staff will decide what needs to be cut either from existing responsibilities or from the proposed project.

From now on Dogwood Initiative will assign a Project Lead to every project with a defined role and decision-making authority.

In future years we will move the release date of the Failing Forward Report to before our fiscal year end of March 31. While the frank internal dialogue about failure necessitated by the Failing Forward Report is essential to the organization, the report itself is a discretionary project, which while nice to have isn't essential to achieving the organization's mission. So, if in the future other more important projects arise, it's OK to skip an annual failure report.

We secured funding to hire a project director for Popular Change mid-2012, which has dramatically reduced the drain on Dogwood Initiative staff. Currently, Popular Change is working on improving internal tracking systems, developing a business plan to attract the funding necessary to add additional staff to service the growing demand for its services.

Our experiences in 2012 confirmed that while cool tools and kits are important, our success depends on deep relationships that are built one conversation at a time. While we will continue to refine our kits and online tools, we will not let the quest for the best tools interfere with efforts to build these relationships.

> At its essence, success in changing the world for the better is about relationships.

#failures in 2011

Failure 1: Getting B.C. Liberal leadership candidates to oppose Enbridge

Goal: Get B.C. Liberal party candidates to publicly oppose Enbridge's oil tanker and pipeline proposal

In 2011, British Columbians had the unique opportunity to choose the leaders of B.C.'s two pre-eminent political parties within a couple of months. These two leaders were likely to be British Columbia's next two premiers. To vote all you had to do was pay a small fee and join either the B.C. Liberals or B.C. NDP.

As part of a coalition called Organizing for Change (OFC), Dogwood Initiative participated in non-partisan efforts to encourage people to join the party of their choice and push the potential leaders to make environmental commitments. The OFC campaign was launched a few days before the NDP window for voting eligibility closed while a few weeks remained to participate in B.C. liberal leadership process. As a part of that process we spoke with senior staff for two B.C. Liberal leadership candidates who voiced their opinions that Enbridge's Northern Gateway proposal would never get built.

It was interesting to have top staff (including a well-connected Alberta-based political operator) so clearly indicate their belief that Enbridge's West Coast oil tanker proposal was dead in the water, although their public rhetoric remained neutral or pro-proposal.

As the B.C. Liberal eligibility window began to close we reviewed the OFC sign-up numbers. It was a modest success, but we thought we could do better on our own. Although it was late in the campaign, and we knew it would be difficult, we thought perhaps with enough leverage from strategically located signups we could get the candidates to say publicly what their staff was saying privately.

So 26 hours before the membership window closed Dogwood Initiative launched a campaign to sign up as many new members as possible to push the candidates to publicly oppose oil tankers. Because the process weighted

Photo courtesy of Evan Leeson.
flickr.com/photos/ecstaticist

votes by riding, we didn't reach out to everyone — just to No Tankers supporters who lived in the 40 ridings where we had lots of supporters and the B.C. Liberals had few existing members. In essence, it was a targeted voter registration campaign.

The response was phenomenal. During the next 26 hours at least 1,000 people joined the party to be eligible to vote.

Ultimately, together with our colleagues we signed up more than 30 per cent of the eligible voters in two ridings, 10 per cent of the eligible voters in an additional 15 ridings and five per cent of eligible voters in an additional 18 ridings. As a last-minute organizing effort it was impressive and through the mistakes and technical glitches we learned a lot about mobilizing British Columbians online to take real world actions.

Unfortunately, we failed to appreciate the politics in four key ways:

1 We miscalculated the difficulty in getting candidates to say publicly what staff were saying privately. We underestimated the herd effect where all the candidates triangulate around one another and no one strays too far from the conventional wisdom.

2 We underestimated the difficulty in actually convincing the candidates how many Dogwood supporters had signed up as members of their party. In other words, we failed in conveying how much leverage we actually had.

3 We failed to appreciate the difficulty in distinguishing Dogwood Initiative's efforts from similar but unrelated efforts by other groups and were tarred by one brush in the media, resulting in the loss of some important non-partisan nuance. Although we knew this campaign would be controversial, we underestimated the vicious backlash that would be unleashed (mostly from members of other parties).

4 Ultimately, despite the flood of last minute signups, we failed. We were not able to get any public commitments out of any of the leadership candidates.

> **"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."**
> **- Thomas Edison**

What We Learned

We learned a lot about how to use online tools to quickly mobilize supporters in specific geographic areas to take real world actions in an election. In the process we discovered the weaknesses in our database, e-mail and phoning systems, and in our capacity to engage thousands of people in complex political issues.

We learned the importance of narrative. This was the first time we developed an intentional story arc — to create a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end.

Before we decided to go ahead, we had endless internal conversations about the pros and cons. In the end, the biggest risk identified was that we might lose a bunch of individual donors who were members of other parties. This didn't happen. Yes, the odd donor was upset, but no more than with any other action and in fact we gained several new donors during this period.

Most importantly, we learned not to be afraid to be bold or to step into the political arena and ask people to do things that seem slightly outside the box.

Going forward, what has changed?

Internally, this action changed the culture of the organization. We weren't sure about what would happen when we jumped into this fire and some staff had misgivings, but we spent the time talking them through and when we went ahead we had complete buy-in. This was essential, so when the attacks came we had each other's backs.

Failure 2: Slow to launch Plan B after Legislated Tanker Ban went down with Tory majority in 2011 federal election
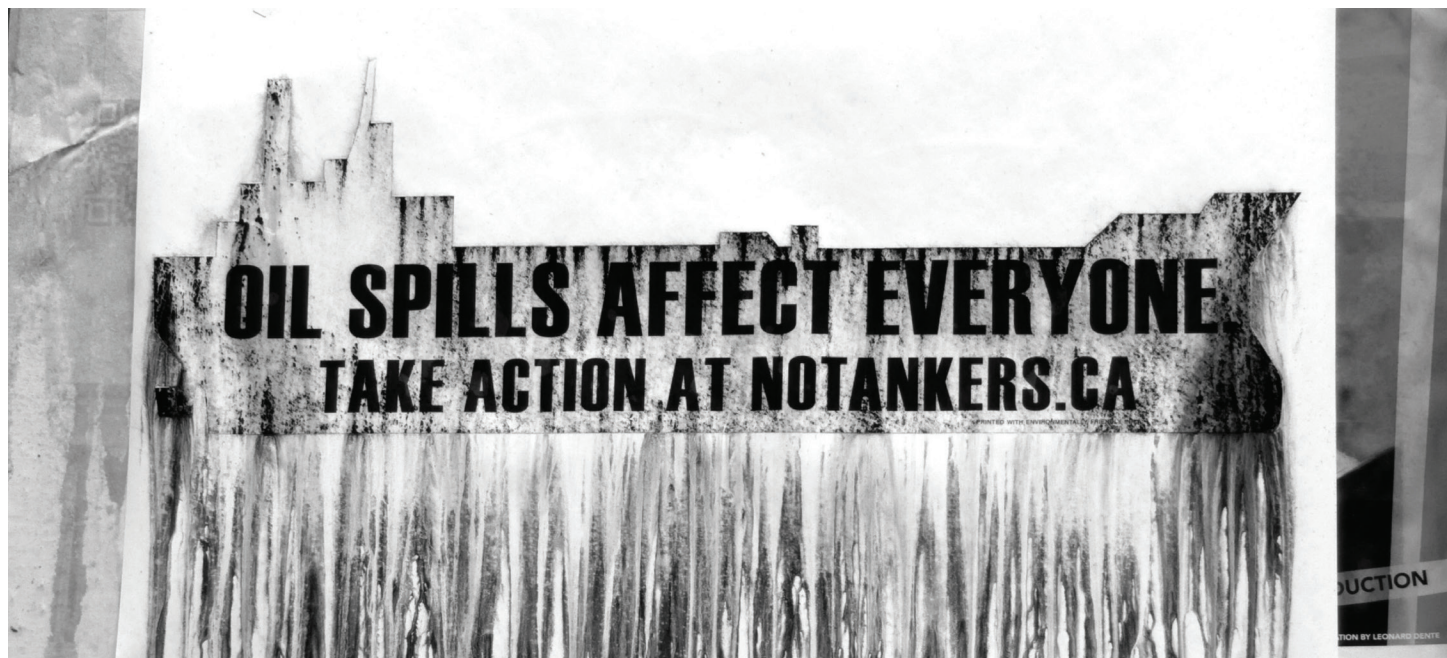
Designed by Rethink Communications.

Elections are always filled with surprises, but the federal election on May 5, 2011, was a doozy.

The Tory majority victory took us, and every top pollster in the country, by surprise. No one predicted the Conservatives would win a majority government — albeit many figured the Tories would make it close.

Since 2005 we had been building support for a federal legislated oil tanker ban. In December 2010 we worked with all federal opposition parties to support an NDP-sponsored motion opposing oil tankers on B.C.'s north coast. Soon after, we worked Liberal MP Joyce Murray to build support behind her private member's bill banning oil tankers on B.C.'s north coast. Murray's private member's bill was poised for second reading when the election writ dropped.

Our failure was in being slow to redirect our efforts once the legislative tanker ban option closed. While the Tory majority has created a four-year hiatus in efforts to permanently ban north coast oil tankers, our focus has been redirected to ensuring the B.C. government uses its various powers to stop West Coast oil tanker proposals. We had discussed our provincial strategy, but our first failure was not being adequately prepared to hit the ground running immediately after the election.

The emotional letdown of having to redirect our efforts after working for so long on getting a legislated ban was also significant.

What We Learned

Be prepared! No matter how remote, it is important to give serious consideration to all the potential scenarios facing a campaign, particularly the various possibilities after an election.

While the specific circumstances of an unexpected majority government will likely not reoccur, having to bounce back after a significant setback will inevitably arise again in the future.

All campaigns have highs and lows. One of the things that separate good organizations from great organizations, good leaders from great leaders, is how they respond to setbacks.

Going forward, what has changed?

One of the biggest lessons we took away from the election was that we were able to make a difference, but only in a few ridings at a time. This has prompted us to begin developing a whole new system of distributed organizing that can be taken to scale, relying more ton volunteers and less on staff.

Failure 3: Our Vancouver Island campaign unnecessarily alienated some supporters

During the last few years our efforts to protect the air, land and water in the Capital Regional District from developers has achieved significant victories. By working together with other groups and our supporters on southern Vancouver Island we:

1 Stopped the subdivision of more than 28,000 hectares of forest near Victoria.

2 Convinced the regional government and province to convert 2,600 hectares of forested coastline into a park.

3 Stopped the development of 226 vacation homes adjacent to the Juan de Fuca trail.

4 Prevented the approval of a massive mega-yacht marina in Victoria's Inner Harbour, forcing the developer to shrink and redesign the proposal.

These were notable victories, but the often needlessly confrontational tone of our verbal, written and online communications unnecessarily created an "us" versus "them" dichotomy that alienated some people.

For example, one regional director called our organization and supporters of the campaign "Political bullies, interfering in local matters" as a result of the tone, tactics and messaging used on the campaign.

Other examples of needlessly hyperbolic tone abound. In the spring time of 2011 Dogwood Initiative's Organizer met with a new volunteer she was really excited about. We'll call the volunteer Joey Smith. He was a recent University of Victoria graduate about to begin a master's degree in journalism. He was a bright, skilled young man, who understood our theory of change and was eager to help.

Half way through this first conversation, the new volunteer almost awkwardly shifted the conversation and began asking about the Vancouver Island campaign and its goal to save the Juan de Fuca trail. He asked "When your material says that there will be no economic benefit… where are you getting that data?" Our Organizer admitted she didn't know. "Well surely," he continued "there will be some benefit, even if it's a small one that will come to the area. Isn't it misleading people to not give the accurate facts? Wouldn't it be more powerful for the numbers to speak for themselves anyway? To show the relative economic benefit rather than make blanket and frankly polarizing statements like this?".

He was absolutely right. Upon reviewing our campaign literature a question of tone and credibility began to appear. How was this campaign showing up in the community? It became clear that Joey, like many other residents of the region, were being turned off by the tone.

Ultimately, the campaign to save the Juan de Fuca was successful in its specific goal, however, the Dogwood Initiative and our staff suffered loss of credibility and social and political capital as a result of a hyperbolized tone, tactics and messaging used on the campaign.

Let's be clear: we are not afraid of picking a fight where needed or of forcefully speaking truth to power. But Dogwood Initiative should never do either gratuitously. Many Dogwood Initiative supporters, potential supporters, staff and volunteers felt some of our tactics and communications on the Vancouver Island campaign crossed this line.

What We Learned
The key takeaway from this experience was the importance of being able to wield power when necessary with decision-makers and opponents while maintaining the utmost respect for them as individuals and in their roles.

Going forward, what has changed?
To ensure the organization retains the right tone across all campaigns, clearer communications procedures were implemented and oversight of the organization's communications increased. We've learned increased oversight is vital to continuing to build Dogwood's reputation as a powerful, but gracious, public interest group with British Columbians' best interests at heart.

"Innovation in mysterious situations requires an iterative approach, improving with each cycle of the feedback loop as ambition and opportunism are calibrated into a dynamic equilibrium. The bigger the challenges, the less likely one is to ever see perfect convergence between framing of the problem and implementation of solutions. Such challenges will always be asymptotic in nature, aiming for but never reaching perfection. Because of this, working on "mysteries" and avoiding burn out requires a particular kind of attitude — one that sees the asymptote as a constant challenge rather than a frustration."

Helsinki Design Lab