

[You win some, you lose some]

A failed experiment, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. As for talking about failure? Not done! But that's just what WUR co-workers do in this feature. Because failure can be useful. In this instalment, we hear from Han Wiskerke, professor of Rural Sociology. Text and illustration Stijn Schreven

'I came back to WUR in 2001 as an associate professor. I successfully rewrote an EU project proposal that had been thought up by others and had been rejected, and I became the project coordinator. For the first time I found myself leading a three-million-euro research project, with 14 partners from seven countries and a lot of very experienced people. At the inception meeting, there was a big furore about the direction the project should go in.

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I felt control slipping through my fingers, but thanks to some tips from a colleague of mine, we got through that meeting without too much damage done.

The third meeting was a big disappointment, though. We had to decide on the methods for the case studies. I wanted everyone to have their say so that the chosen approach would have their full support. In retrospect,

that was naive. When I ended the meeting with a round of reflection, I met with stiff opposition. I wasn't well prepared for it, I didn't come up with enough ideas of my own, and I should have taken the lead more. I was in despair about how to bring it all to a successful conclusion.

But that harsh feedback was helpful as well. Besides the annual project meetings, I planned interim meetings in Brussels to prepare the agenda for the big meetings. This gave me more control over the project and at the same time we shared the responsibility.

That first project gave me a basic project management toolkit, which meant I had more peace of mind in other projects. And since then, I have only managed projects of which I wrote the entire proposal myself. That way I know the project setup from A to Z, and that gives you confidence. I have led a lot of EU projects since then. There are always ups and downs that you can't plan for, and that I learn from.

