STILL I RISE

FAILURE REPORT

Our biggest mistakes of 2024, by Department, and the lessons we learned.

www.stillirise.org

INTRODUCTION

This is the first year in which we publish a “Failure Report”, a report on our errors, and our commitment is that it becomes a fixed annual appointment. Indeed, despite the negative connotation that the words “failure” or “mistake” carry, we believe that failing and making mistakes are inevitable, especially when you put yourself on the line and attempt the endeavor.

And that is exactly what Still I Rise represents. By putting ourselves on the line we learn every day, we make mistakes, we evolve and we improve.

Failure is necessary for success: what matters is not to never fail, but to fail while learning from one’s errors.

We teach this also to students in our Schools: do not fear making mistakes and failing, but learn from them and then try again. And again, and again, and again. Only in this way does one grow.

In line with our philosophy, each department director, including our CEO, has compiled a list of last year’s biggest failures, sorted by area, and what we learned from them.

NICOLÒ GOVONI - CEO

Failure: inconsistent approach to leadership

As leader of the organization, it is my duty to lead by example and to inspire my colleagues through my decisions and leadership. Unfortunately, I am still learning the art of being a leader, and the mistakes I make, whether from wrong choices or from lack of action, not only negatively affect team members, but also disorient them.

Throughout 2024, my leadership approach, especially regarding monitoring and delegation, has been at least inconsistent. One might say this was due to external circumstances which forced me to divert my attention elsewhere, but that would simply be an excuse to justify the fact that I have not yet defined a coherent leadership approach, nor have I fully developed established managerial habits.

For example: in January 2024 I was involved in two field missions, the first in Yemen and the second in Colombia. This partially compromised my ability to coordinate effectively with the organization's directors, causing significant delays in setting objectives and pursuing them. One of the main consequences was the postponement of finalizing the **2024 Business Plan**, which was shared with the rest of the **Still I Rise team** only in April. This caused substantial delays in the implementation of key activities within the organization.

Lessons learned

Objective-setting and drafting the annual Business Plan must take place **well in advance** of the new year.

When I am engaged in field missions, I will ensure that I delegate my objectives and that my colleagues are fully equipped to pursue their own.

To simplify communication and monitoring, **SIR will adopt the project-management tool Asana in 2025.**

In **April and May 2024**, due to **Giovanni Volpe**'s departure to launch operations in India and the absence of an official **Head of School in Kenya**, I found myself filling that role full-time. This proved unsustainable, especially when the country was hit by historic rainfall that caused considerable disruption and disorder, compounded by an attempt at extortion by local authorities in Mathare. Unfortunately, all this happened simultaneously with the planning and launch of the **India School campaign**, our most important fundraising event of 2024, which required interventions and corrections on the fly. As a result, I went from a leadership approach characterised by light supervision and limited communication to **extreme micromanagement** in a matter of two months. This caused frustration and inefficiency, despite meeting all objectives, both in the field and in fundraising.

Lessons learned

We have formalised the roles of Giovanni and myself as **co-Heads of School in Kenya**, defining a management structure that helps us to run the campus.

We have agreed that **any campaign planning phase should begin at least 4 months in advance**. This will allow me to devote time to other initiatives without compromising processes that might require my intervention or direct approval.

Finally, in **July and August 2024** I had to almost completely suspend my coordination and oversight activities due to the imminent **deadline of the book I wrote for Rizzoli**. This caused further delays, impacting particularly the **recruitment of new teachers** in the field and the design of fundraising initiatives for autumn/winter. Once again I felt the need to intervene to correct some activities I deemed inadequate for achieving year-end goals, causing friction and disorganisation.

Lessons learned

I will consciously adopt a well-defined leadership approach, communicated openly, commit to maintaining it, and take responsibility for mistakes without constantly course-correcting mid-year.

I will clearly establish objectives for each department from the start and monitor their progress via weekly check-ins on Asana.

GIULIA CICOLI - CHIEF FUNDRAISING AND COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER

Failure: not achieving the fundraising target

The fundraising target for 2024 was **€4 million**, but we closed the year at approximately €**3.5 million**, missing the target by around **€500,000.** We still managed to cover expenses and secure a small margin, but not as much as we hoped for investing in future projects in 2025 and beyond.

Contributing factors

- At the start of the year, **the department lacked key roles and internal capabilities**, and some areas were left pending until the right hires arrived mid-year.
- **Inadequate planning** and lack of strategy in the first months of the year.
- **Unexpected collapse of credit-card donations** early in the year, with loss of regular donors and one-off donations. We only managed to restore credit-card donations towards year-end.
- Some donations we had expected to arrive in 2024 were **postponed to the following year**.

Lessons learned

Planning and a well-defined strategy are essential. **This year we planned in advance.**

Instead of waiting for new hires, we **asked trusted experts for help** and split tasks among the teams.

We **automated processes** to improve the donor experience.

We are **completely rethinking our approach**, expanding and diversifying our fundraising channels.

MIKE FISHER - CHIEF SCHOOLS OFFICER

Failure: lack of a unified evaluation system for the International Schools

In December we found ourselves having to make decisions about how much our International Schools' students were progressing, and who should advance to the next year, repeat, or even exit the programme. In both Kenya and Colombia (though to a lesser degree, but still significant), we were not properly equipped to make clear, informed decisions on several student cases. Considering that exiting or remaining in the programme can change these young people's lives, this is a highly relevant issue.

Contributing factors

- **The initial baseline data were not solid enough**. Especially in Kenya, where the programme has existed for several years, we had not yet established a reliable data-collection system, and updating this data was not initially consistent. So while the end-of-year data were more reliable, we lacked comparative data to measure progress.
- **Failure to diagnose students with special educational needs** (SEN). This evaluation was accessible and available from the start of the year, but no one took direct responsibility for initiating the process. Being an area at the interface between education and child protection, this error was an important lesson.
- **Failure to plan SEN resources** in the programme's budget forecast, leading to confusion about what could or could not be spent.
- **Inadequate differentiation** techniques, both in class and in extra sessions. When, at the end of the year, we asked which interventions had been implemented to address gaps identified months earlier, the answers were often insufficient.

Lessons learned

In 2025, as a team we have **analysed the errors** and we will:

- Conduct **formative and summative assessments** from the very start of the academic year, aligned with IB standards, to collect useful and accurate baseline data.
- **Plan and budget personalised interventions** for students with special educational needs.
- Students are now receiving **SEN diagnoses** and we are building a network of local and global specialist partners to support both the students and their teachers with specific training.
- Students with difficulties are being identified earlier and provided with **Individual Education Plans (IEPs)** with timely interventions.
- We are implementing new differentiation techniques, including:
  - An **AI-tool** for personalised learning.
  - A **peer-tutoring system** in which the tutor receives credits based on the progress of the tutee.
- We have **redefined the responsibilities between the Child Protection team (CPS) and the Education department**, establishing clear expectations of proactive action for student welfare.

GIOVANNI VOLPE - GENERAL COUNSEL

Failure: delays in registering the School in Colombia

The registration process of the school in Colombia suffered significant delay due to the non-issuance of the urban development license linked to the structural recognition of the building.

The damage was twofold:

- ·**Time and resources lost**, with expenditures of over €3,000 in engineering consultancy which proved ineffective;
- **Delay in the formal registration**, which made necessary extensions granted by the Ministry of Education, and the final documentation is still pending.

The main cause was a lack of effective oversight by the Head of School, and generally by the local team, which operated too autonomously relative to the global team. In some cases, making choices that did not adhere to the organisation's procedural standards. A case in point: the selection of the engineering firm, which was done without proper vetting, causing significant delays in preparing the structural recognition application.

Damage containment & educational continuity

Despite the urban license still being pending, students continued to receive formal education and the school proceeded with its application to the IB MYP programme.

Specifically:

- **The IB application process** allows delivering the curriculum even before ministry registration, provided the school meets certain quality requirements and receives support from the IB team;
- **Online training courses were made available**, enabling students to attend our School while simultaneously earning academic credits.

This dual approach enabled us to contain the effect of the delay, safeguarding both the students' educational path and the credibility of the school project.

Lessons learned

This episode highlighted serious shortcomings in the monitoring and oversight mechanisms by the global team. In particular:

It is necessary to structure **a regular and documented supervision system** for work carried out in the field.

Transparent procedures must be adopted for the selection of suppliers and consultants, with market analysis and competitive bidding.

Preventive risk assessment must be strengthened, especially in contexts subject to complex administrative dynamics.

The most important lesson concerns **the urgency of pairing local autonomy with active**, professional central control capable of preventing inefficiencies, protecting resources and safeguarding the effectiveness of the educational intervention.

Failure: Partner evaluation and negotiations for India

In 2024, the most significant failure of my department was a misjudgement during negotiations for a real-estate contract in India, which led to time loss and delays in the project's progress.

From a programme perspective, every real-estate transaction must respect the **principle of decision-making based on full knowledge**: all parties must disclose relevant information so that clear command lines can be established. However, this principle was not properly followed in one specific case.

We had identified land owned by a large organisation with **strong potential for our aims**. The negotiation required **thorough due diligence** given the sensitivity of the operation. While we negotiated the general commercial terms, a detailed verification process was needed to ensure the feasibility and legality of the agreement. Because of the attractiveness of the opportunity, we decided to proceed with the negotiations, investing time in preparing an agreement. Unfortunately, the counterpart's representative lacked legal authority to negotiate on behalf of the organisation, a fact discovered only later.

Had we conducted a **legal verification in advance**, we would have immediately identified that the representative was not authorised to negotiate, saving precious time. This mistake underscored how crucial it is to rigidly follow partner-evaluation procedures.

Lessons learned

Mandatory verification: Before beginning any negotiation, the identity and authority of involved representatives must be verified.

Adherence to procedures: One must never depart from operational standards, no matter how attractive the agreement may be.

LAURA ARENA ARDUINI - CHIEF OF FINANCE

Failure: Interruption of the credit-card transaction provider

The migration from one donation-management system to another **interrupted the connection with Wordline**, our intermediary for credit-card transactions. This caused loss of **recurring donations** and an estimated **financial loss of €80,000**, in addition to significant operational inefficiencies.

Contributing factors

- **Poor coordination** between internal teams and Wordline's technical support during the migration.
- **Lack of clarity** regarding data-transfer requirements, with missing steps and incomplete integration.
- **Insufficient technical expertise** within Still I Rise to manage complex system migrations.
- **Wordline** continued to charge fees despite termination of the contract, creating further frustration and financial losses.

Lessons learned

A more rigorous vendor-selection process, including detailed analysis of compatibility with organisational needs.

More structured system-migration management, with strict adherence to timelines and involvement of all stakeholders.

Greater internal technical competence, with specific training to manage integrations and transitions independently.

Thorough contract review with legal support, to avoid unauthorised costs in the future.

Structuring a new finance department through the hiring of a Head of Functions who brings the necessary experience to SIR.

Legal note

Regarding the matter with Wordline, the Legal Department together with the Finance Department, after thoroughly reviewing all correspondence between the parties and examining all existing contractual documentation with the aforementioned company, agreed to proceed against WL, initially via the internal legal office of the APS, submitting a formal legal notice by PEC on 24 April 2024, in which the disruption suffered was denounced and the inconvenience caused to the APS in relation to its donor community was also highlighted.

In the same context, WL was invited to the immediate restoration of Still I Rise APS's donation-management system, and to proceed with any other fulfilment provided for and agreed in the contract entered into with the latter.

Meanwhile, the association continuously sent emails to Worldline contacts and held telephone sessions with various operators, without however ever obtaining a constructive result with respect to the persistent criticalities and problems caused by said service provider, but rather continuing to incur costs for services never rendered, yet still billed to the APS by the counterpart.

In view of the fact that, to the aforementioned PEC, the WL claims office on 15 May 2024 gave a sterile response in every respect, the SIR Legal Department, after submitting to the APS's external legal firm a report on the whole affair and the dispute in progress between Still I Rise and Worldline, and after working and studying all legal considerations and identifying every potential legal claim of the case, on 17 December 2024 conferred a mandate to Attorney Alessandro Da Re of the Treviso Bar to proceed against Worldline, first by attempting an amicable settlement of the dispute, and subsequently, where that proves impossible, to proceed with any appropriate legal action before the Banking and Financial Arbitrator and/or in court before the competent Authorities.

CONCLUSION

Through the publication of this **Failure Report**, we wish to make our commitment to **continuous improvement explicit**. Failure is part of the growth journey, but only if we learn its lessons and turn them into opportunities.

In 2025, we will implement the necessary changes to consolidate our strategies, optimise project management and strengthen our operations.

With humility and determination, we continue to grow.

STILL I RISE

LET’S CHANGE THE WORLD TOGETHER ONE CHILD AT A TIME

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