Lessons learned saves lives. Over the course of 36 years of service in multiple theatres of operations and at every level of command, I know this to be true. As Canadian troops prepared for the move from Kabul to Kandahar, Afghanistan in the fall and spring of 2005 and 2006, our intelligence system was well experienced in the Balkans and Kabul dynamic, an operational environment within which we identified the threat so that we could avoid it. As we entered Kandahar, it became evident that what was now required was a system that could identify the enemy so that we could neutralize it: a subtle but absolutely critical change. Staffs and commanders at all levels became decisively engaged in restructuring the intelligence architecture in such a way that the intelligence picture could be transmitted to and used by the troops on the ground and vice versa. This transformation was assisted by a lessons learned community of practice that could compile evidence, analyze data, and act as a knowledge database, which allowed a continuity of information essential to agile organizations.

The results do not have to be so dramatic to demonstrate the benefits of a valid and functional lessons learned process. I have also experienced the value of lessons learned in situations where the organization improved its daily routine and institutional effectiveness as a result of such a process. In 2012, the Canadian Forces sought to consolidate its operational level command and control by amalgamating three very disparate headquarters that had developed their own way of doing business during the high operational tempo of the Afghanistan years. The first step in this process was a detailed review of what we had learned over the previous 7 years so that we could ensure best practices were maintained and that we avoided the pitfalls of making the same mistakes.

Lessons learned, as a primary function within any organization, be it in the military, business, or non-profit worlds, is essential to establishing agility and resiliency. Maintaining best practices, avoiding costly errors, improving quality of products and likelihood of mission accomplishment and the increase to bottom line profitability are all objectives sought by learning and successful organizations.

Yet, Lessons learned are not so easy to do, even though most senior management and leaders will assume they do it or will claim they have a lessons learned process in place. In most cases, this is more wishful thinking than reality. As a former Commanding Officer of the Canadian Forces Warfare Centre, which leads the Canadian Armed Forces lessons learned process, I was able to observe this first hand. At the time, the process was in its developmental stage and had not been uniformly developed throughout the whole organization. Each environment (Navy, Army, Air Force, and Support) all had separate and often disjointed processes. Sharing of processes and lessons learned was practically non-existent between these elements. Silos of excellence developed over time with the associated duplication of overhead and subsequent overall inefficiency.
What are the obstacles to putting in place something that is so critical to the success of operations and organizations? Though the concept of learning from experience seems to be a simple and time honoured concept, the actual execution is significantly more complex. Barriers to success exist in the form of resistance to change, reluctance to risk exposure of weaknesses or fault, and just a lack of commitment to organizational learning. It’s hard! The process requires commitment of often scarce resources with often intangible immediate benefits. We don’t know what we don’t know! As a result, it is difficult for senior management to justify the commitment of the needed resources to address an unknown benefit.

The success of any lessons learned process is fully dependant on the culture of the organization. This culture of learning must start with senior, sustained leadership. It is inculcated through the development of a permissive environment that allows contributions from all levels, and it is sustained by a formalized system of analysis and the ability to record, share, and implement lessons learned. More than anything, it is required of organizations that see themselves adapting to the times and as a result being successful over a significant period of time.

Lessons learned as a process is an art, or at best an imperfect science. It requires skill and dedication to effectively engage it as a formal process in any organization. Until now, there has not been a consolidated reference for those that are engaged in the development of an organizational lessons learned process. This book accomplishes this by consolidating the knowledge and expertise of contributors from various learning organizations around the world. It is a lessons learned work for lessons learned practitioners.

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Steve P. Noonan received a Bachelor of Engineering degree in Fuels and Materials (minor in hockey) in 1982 from Royal Military College in Kingston. As a line officer, MGen Noonan commanded the airborne engineer troop and squadron in 2 CER, was second-in-command of 77 Armoured Engineer Squadron with 32 Armoured Engineer Regiment in British Army on the Rhine, commanded 41 Field Squadron in 4 Combat Engineer Regiment (during which he deployed to the Former Republic of Yugoslavia as part of Operation HARMONY Rotation 0), commanded 1 Combat Engineer Regiment in Edmonton 1999-2001, commanded Task Force Afghanistan Rotation 0 Aug 05-Mar 06 leading the Canadian effort in theatre for operations ARCHER, ATHENA, and ARGUS (where he was awarded the Meritorious Service Cross and the US Bronze Star Medal), the CF Experimentation Centre Jul 08-Jul 09 and the Information Management Operations Division Jul 09-Jun 12. His staff officer postings include four years as A/Divisional Engineer, G3 Engineer, and G3 Plans (Exercises) with 1 Canadian Division Headquarters in Kingston, one year as part of the J3 Engineer staff in Ottawa, three years with the CLS staff where he was involved in Army Transformation, and he acted as the J3 for Canadian Expeditionary Force Command from Jul 06-Jan 08. He is a graduate of Canadian Forces Land Command and Staff College (1991), the Canadian Forces Command and Staff Course (1999), the National Security Studies Programme (2008), and the US Capstone Program (2009). MGen Noonan was promoted to his current rank in 2012 and is currently Deputy Commander within the newly formed Canadian Joint Operations Command having transitioned to this position through the Command of Canadian Operational Support Command.