Chapter 1
Lessons Learned: Theory and Practice

Irene Kitimbo
McGill University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the meaning of lessons learned and use of the concept for organizational innovation and change. This literature review situates lessons learned within the broader field of organizational learning, especially experiential learning, where the source of learning is either personal experience or the experience of others. The chapter begins with a review and definition of key concepts. This is followed by a discussion of organizational learning theories for guidance on the concept of lessons learned. Next, the lessons learning process is explored and various methods for conducting lessons learned are reviewed. The chapter continues with a discussion on the prevalence and effectiveness of lessons learned processes. Finally, challenges to conducting effective lessons learned and possible solutions or success factors for effective lessons learned are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Lessons learned are important as a corrective practice, helping to improve efficiency, effectiveness and ultimately organizational performance. In spite of the recognized importance of lessons learned, organizations in general, have not been able to implement these processes for learning. Several factors such as: representation, centralization, deferral and lack of interoperability between systems make the learning process onerous for practitioners. The implications are that lessons tend not to be learned in the organizational setting, with management understanding neither the process nor the need for rigor (Swan, Scarbrough and Newell, 2010) such that mistakes are repeated, work is duplicated and time and resources are wasted.

While not exhaustive, the chapter attempts to bring together different studies on lessons learned, as a means by which organizations learn from experience to improve future performance, and the factors that influence this learning process. The concept of lessons learned is not new and many approaches to conducting lessons learned have been developed over the years. The objective of this chapter is to discuss common themes around generating lessons learned, harvesting these lessons and reusing them for enhanced performance.

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CONCEPTS, DEFINITIONS, AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

For the purpose of this text, knowledge and learning are defined as follows:

**Knowledge** is a difficult concept to define. In *Working Knowledge*, Davenport and Prusak (1998) argue that knowledge is a mixture of various elements: it is fluid as well as formally structured; it is intuitive and therefore hard to capture in words or understand completely in logical terms. Knowledge exists within people, as part and parcel of human complexity and unpredictability. The authors go on to define knowledge as “a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information”. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers...” (p.5). In addition, Koskinen and Philanto (2008) suggested that knowledge is “an individual’s perception, skills and competencies, experience, cognitive and intellectual activity, which are all dependent on what experiences the individual’s world view contains in the form of meanings” (p.43). Both definitions support a tacit dimension of knowledge popularized by Polanyi. According to Polanyi (1966) in Nonaka et al. (2006, p. 1182), knowledge can be either tacit or explicit. Tacit knowledge refers to difficult to articulate insights rooted in experience and intuition and tied to the senses. It indwells in a comprehensive cognizance of the human body and mind. Tacit knowledge is difficult to transfer. In contrast, explicit knowledge can be expressed in formal and systematic language and shared in the form of data, scientific formulae, specifications, and manuals.

**Learning** is “the process by which knowledge is created from experience and the path by which improvement takes place” (Fiol and Lyles, 1985, p.811). In other words, there has to be an event which triggers a reaction, this reaction in turn causes a shift in the original state, the shift embodies new knowledge or learning and the new end state is an improvement over the original due to the learning that has occurred. Following this argument, Learning is manifested by change in action following the acquisition of new, previously unknown knowledge. Learning thus encompasses two meanings: “the acquisition of know-how, which implies the physical ability to produce some action, and the acquisition of know-why, which implies the ability to articulate a conceptual understanding of an experience” (Kim, 1993). In other words, one must acquire knowledge in order to learn and through the learning processes that person arrives at a higher state of knowledge where they can effect change.

Learning and knowledge therefore feed off each other in an “iterative, mutually reinforcing process” (Vera and Crossan, 2003). The act of learning provides knowledge and understanding, which in turn feed further learning. This chapter embraces both dimensions of knowledge as well as characteristics that make knowledge (lessons) valuable and at the same time difficult to learn.

Lessons Learned

Several definitions of lessons learned (LL) have been proposed. For example: The US Army Centre for Army Lessons Learned (2009) defined lessons learned as, “validated knowledge and experience derived from observations and historical study of military training, exercises, and combat operations that lead to a change in behavior at either the tactical (standing operating procedures [SOP], TTP, e.t.c), operational or strategic level or in one or more of the Army’s DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership, and education, personnel, and facilities domains.” Another definition used by the American, European and Japanese Space Agencies is: “A lesson learned is knowledge or understanding gained by experience.
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