Chapter 3
Essential Stages of the Lessons Learned Process

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ABSTRACT

There are numerous models of learning and knowledge management processes but few—if any—of pure lessons learned process. The aim of this chapter is to examine the essential elements of an effective lessons learned process based on the concepts and principles provided in the models presented. The goal is to present a usable model for general application in the development of an evidence-based lessons learned process for organizations of various complexities.

LESSON LEARNED

A lesson learned is a knowledge or understanding gained by experience. The experience may be positive, as in a successful test or mission, or negative, as in a mishap or failure. A lesson must be significant in that it has a real or assumed impact on operations; valid in that it is factually and technically correct; and applicable in that it identifies a specific design, process, or decision that reduces or eliminates the potential for failures and mishaps, or reinforces a positive result. (Secchi, et al., 1999, p.57)

INTRODUCTION

The lessons learned process may be simple or complex dependent on the environment and the organization in which the process resides. This chapter examines the essential stages of a successful evidence based lessons learned program that is adaptable to any size and type of organization. To accomplish this, several process models are examined to determine what is needed and what works. Sources used in this analysis are derived from O’Dell (2004), Thomas (2011), Jorvig (2008), Collison & Parcell (2004), Dalkir

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6453-1.ch003
(2005), and Von Krogh, et al. (2000). Each of these sources presented variations of models of knowledge management and organizational learning in application to the particular subject areas of their work. As a result they do not fit perfectly in the context of a single model or process but do provide excellent perspectives on the complexity and spectrum of approaches to knowledge acquisition and application, which is the essence of the lessons learned process. There are numerous models that are similar to these, and each basic type could use a dedicated chapter to fully examine their intricacies. These examples were chosen due to their overall quality and clarity in purpose. As well they represent a wide cross-section of models intended for different usages and developed from differing perspectives. Each of the models are examined separately to demonstrate these approaches and to examine the common threads throughout the models.

Knowledge Management (KM) and Lessons Learned (LL) are in fact inseparable and complementary processes that share common stages of development and implementation. O’Dell (2004) argues that LL is treated as a subset and sometimes minor component of KM (p.12). In many large organizations KM is incorrectly interpreted as equating to Information Management (IM) and Information Technology (IT) and the responsibility is often assigned to or combined with the IM department. Technology is seen as the solution, or the downfall, depending on your perspective, of knowledge management and organizational learning. From the author’s experience it is quite clear that many senior managers do not understand the differences or the roles of these distinct functions nor the importance of the processes to the organizations function. This has also been noted by other authors.

At a recent meeting, a general officer suggested that Knowledge Management was just another passing fad. It was thought that he, and perhaps some of his colleagues, did not understand what knowledge management is and why it should be a priority in the Defence Department, so it was decided to articulate why knowledge management is important. Equally, it is hoped to stimulate debate on the subject and challenge the naysayers to explain their views. (Girard, 2008, p.17)

Knowledge Management should encompass the development of organizational learning and provide the cultural, technological, and functional processes needed to ensure the retention and distribution of knowledge. The art of the acquisition and development of this knowledge is a function of the evidence based lessons learned process. True KM and LL must be integral to the operational function of the organization, led by and for operations. IM and IT, support this function by providing and maintaining the technological tools, including databases and collaborative work environments. Care should be taken not to put the cart before the horse as in many cases the shiny new machine, software or system may overshadow the underlying process and mission. In the extreme and unfortunately very frequent case, this is quite evident where the process is driven by the technology rather than the reverse. In the author’s personal experience with the Canadian Armed Forces, the implementation of the Knowledge Management System, and IT knowledge warehouse, designed to service the lessons learned process was actually designed and implemented prior to the full development of the mature lessons learned policy and guidance. The result was a very complex piece of software based on the architect’s interpretation of the needs rather than a tool designed around supporting an established policy and process. The two were in many ways not compatible and resulted in frustration with the software to the point where most users stopped using the software, forcing the implementation of an improved version many years later. Consequently there was a lack of confidence in the lessons learned process and inflated costs to make the software suitable for use in the organization.