Chapter 4
Operationalization of the Lessons Learned Process: A Practical Approach

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ABSTRACT
An essential step on the road to solving the lessons learned challenge is for organizations to “operationalize” the process for lessons learned such that the important lessons are not just observed but are learned over time to improve organizational behaviour. There are seven key findings: the engagement and integration of leadership into the lessons learned process; the development of spheres of influence and the corresponding organizational “loops”; the selection of a limited number of “rolled-up” observations to pursue – “five (good ones) are much better than 500”; the use of symposia to ensure education and collective “buy-in”; the development of action plans to engage the leadership and provide a practical direction on the way ahead; the triggering, packaging, dispatching, and recreation of lessons identified such that they are attainable and welcomed by the receiving stakeholders; and the development of logical, distinct steps in creating a database.

INTRODUCTION
To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often. (Winston Churchill)

Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. (Quote attributed to Rita Mae Brown, amongst others)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6453-1.ch004

All organizational activities, be they pre-planned or reactive to non-forecast circumstances, exercises or real-life operations, give rise to opportunities to learn and change for the better – particularly for the leadership of an organization. The cycle of initial learning, exercises/operations, professional development, performance measurement, and lessons learned has the potential to lead...
Operationalization of the Lessons Learned Process

Organizations to continuous improvement in how they do business. And yet, it is often the case that while training and exercises are performed as planned and certain measures of performance are recorded, lessons are often left hanging and are soon forgotten – never learned.

Why is it so difficult to successfully learn the lessons of organizational experience? One of the reasons may be that the conceptual bar is set high: for a lesson to be learned, organizational behaviour must be changed and cultural responses altered permanently – or at least until the next experience gives rise to further lessons. Another reason for lessons often dying on the vine is that the issues of the present frequently out-trump those of the past and lessons from an exercise just finished cede importance to the next priority task – in other words, the pace of current activity can often preclude the benefits of analysis of past performance. Organizations have difficulties dealing with multiple lessons identified at multiple levels when the exigencies of day-to-day work requirements preclude the necessary analysis and presentation to decision-makers.

Yet another impediment to the successful integration of lessons based on experience is the frequent misperception that observations are primarily based on “mistakes” – that is, a lesson observed is potentially a subtle criticism of organizational leadership. It is a significant leadership challenge in most organizations to ensure that lessons observed are understood to be a positive benefit to the organization – indeed that they are essential to a healthy change environment.

While some training or operational activities are relatively modest in size (a section-level business continuity table top exercise, for example) where lessons that arise from them can be integrated quickly into local practices, other activities are very large (Olympics, G20, sporting events etc.) and involve multiple levels of organization – thus lessons that are evident to participants must be accepted by many organizations, each of which must deal with the change issue mentioned above. Regardless of the scale, if organizations, and indeed nations, are to avoid repeating past mistakes and improve how they deal with planned and unplanned events, a deliberate learning process must be established, championed by the organizational leadership and managed through a governance structure that ensures a process that can collect, analyze, and manage issues that are observed to be done poorly or very well.

An essential step on the road to solving the lessons learned challenge is for organizations to “operationalize” the process for Lessons Learned such that the important lessons are not just observed but they are learned over time to improve the organizational behaviour. To do otherwise rapidly devalues the significance of the experience and condemns the entity, be it a small organization or an international corporation, to repeat the problem and mistakes over and over.

This chapter will explain a generalized approach and methodology to operationalize the lessons learned process in the context of inter-departmental collaboration between federal departments in Canadian Special Security Events (CSSE) that take place in Canada. The majority of the theory that is introduced in this chapter was developed by the authors as they developed a practical approach to operationalizing the lessons learned process for this specific CSSE, based on approximately fifty years of combined operational experience – much of it spent learning lessons.

BACKGROUND

While illustrating the relevant definitions, Figure 1 (below) also demonstrates the cyclical nature of the Lessons Learned process. An effective process always starts with the initial planning and preparation for the lessons learned activity, well ahead of the operational action when possible; but even when the specific opportunity for lessons learned cannot be pre-planned, a learning culture will have an existing methodology that allows for