Chapter 10
Using Stories to Institutionalize Lessons Learned:
How to Better Remember and Learn from the Past

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges of any lessons learned system is how to ensure that this content is actually implemented: by individual employees, by work teams, and by the organization as a whole. While we are guided by a number of theories on how newly acquired knowledge can become institutionalized such that it becomes “the way things are done,” there is very little theory or evidence-based practice to guide us on specific implementation strategies. This chapter presents specific strategies that were used to ensure that lessons learned became embedded in the organization including storytelling, narrative databases, simulation games, employee orientation, training, and professional development strategies. The role of technologies and the role of culture in the success or failure of these strategies are discussed together with recommendations on how to best ensure lessons learned result in learning and, ultimately, how they create changes in individual, group, and organizational behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The enormous potential offered by an effective lessons learned process lies in its contribution to learning at three levels: individuals, groups or teams, and the organization itself. Individual learning from lessons learned tends to be a formal (or informal) event that may or may not be embedded in a training program. For example, a number of organizations adopt a “push” approach where lessons learned are posted on a centrally available location and publicized. It is up to each individual to decide to access and learn from the lesson. At a minimum, the lesson learned is a short textual document that is meant to be read. A more refined form would include annotations, metadata indicating when, where and how to implement this lesson as well as pointers to additional resources (references and people knowledgeable about the event, the solution, the technique and so on). Ide-
ally, the lesson to be learned is implemented as an e-learning module and/or integrated into some form of training in order to maximize the transfer of learning to actual changed (i.e. improved) work practices.

The implementation of lessons learned therefore can be viewed as a form of learning. This means that we should be able to use evidence-based learning mechanisms in an organizational setting. The target audience is characterized not only as adult learners but professionals who would best learn on a just-in-time or opportunistic manner. The time lapse, and indeed even the physical proximity between the learning and the doing site, must be kept at a minimum. The learning should be highly contextualized so that the target audience not only understands what the implications of the lesson to be learned are but exactly how to implement the lesson in their specific work context.

To this end, one of the tried and true learning mechanisms that has been very successful consists of storytelling – both written (today, digital) and oral stories have long proven their worth in teaching very complex knowledge firmly anchored in a realistic context. Organizational storytelling was therefore investigated as a potential channel to ensure that lessons are learned and eventually institutionalized.

ORGANIZATIONAL STORYTELLING

Swap et al (2001) define an organizational story as a detailed narrative of past management actions, employee interactions, or other intra- or extra-organisational events. These stories are usually communicated informally within the organisation. Normally, such stories consist of a plot, major characters, and an outcome. Gill (2001) describes narratives as frameworks that we use in order to make sense of the world. It is an ancient method of sharing and preserving valuable knowledge and therefore a very effective means of learning from the experience of others. Stories can also be used in organizations. In fact, “corporate anthropologists” conduct ethnographic research to better understand what defines and organization and what type of culture it has (Snowden, 2003). The most commonly used forms are anecdotes, myths, fables, and metaphors. What they have in common is that they convey a clear message, a moral of the story or … a lesson to be learned.

Denning (2000; 2005) was among the first to highlight the role of storytelling as a springboard to gain management support and catalyze organizational change. He noted stories can be very effective in motivating others to action, transmitting organizational values, getting people to work together, sharing knowledge, solving problems, and innovating. When they are done well, stories can help disseminate knowledge, especially tacit knowledge (Dalkir and Wiseman, 2004), as they do an excellent job of capturing complex, controversial content that requires a change in attitude in addition to the acquiring of new competencies. Stories can be easily understood and they can be easily disseminated through almost any communication channel (newsletters, blogs, water-cooler chats, formal training programs and employee orientation, or other onboarding activities).

One of the reasons why stories are so powerful resides in the fact that they not only convey facts (what happened?) but they can convey this information with its context intact (why did it happen?). In addition, good stories are designed to trigger an emotional response which in turn leads to stories being remembered. Where there are multiple protagonists, the writer is trying to match the reader to at least one of them. Once you identify with a character in a story, you experience the story and the learning in a much more personal and immediate manner. Stories are the opposite of neutral, distanced scientific writing (e.g. a technical manual). The goal is to catch and