Chapter 12
Common Pitfalls and Shortcomings of Lessons Learned Programs: Evidence from an Online Survey

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ABSTRACT

While many organizations attempt to implement a Lessons Learned program, very few reach a state of becoming a “Learning Organization.” Surveys conducted by Knoco show that when asked how effective the program was, the average self-assessed score is 48%. Much of the problem is a lack of sufficient skilled and appropriate people, assessment and implementation processes, technology and governance; but even when these are in place, the single most common problem is that lessons are treated as observations and rarely used to drive lasting change. In addition, we find issues such as a lack of governance around the lesson-learning process, the lessons database is seen as a repository not a lessons management system, quality control is needed at the input stage, and ensuring sufficient evaluation. This chapter describes these problems and outlines some mitigation strategies to shift observations and knowledge capture to a more applied implementation level.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so. (Adams, 1990, retrieved from http://www.quotes.net/quote/326)

In his chapter elsewhere in this book, “A Model for Evidence-Based Learning through Lesson-Learning Systems: Examples from the Oil and Gas Sector,” Dr Nick Milton outlines a typical framework, which this chapter will also use as a working definition of an effective Lessons Learned regime. A learning organization is the
term given to a company that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself (Milton, 2010). In common parlance, a learning organization is one which learns continuously across the whole scope of activity and applies that learning for business benefit. While this chapter centres on Lessons Learned, the concept of a learning organization is important because it is often quoted as an aspirational goal by many people involved in Lessons Learned initiatives.

A Lessons Learned regime has three components:

1. **Lessons Capture**: In which lessons are identified and validated;
2. **Action/Update Management**: In which lessons are translated into action plans and those are progressed to completion; and
3. **Lesson Broadcast, Review, and Re-Use**: In which lessons are promulgated.

Throughout this chapter the term “organization” covers public and private sector, large and small, commercial and not-for-profit organizations. The Lessons Learned regime is common to all sectors and sizes. The term “profitability” used below can be interpreted as “organizational effectiveness”. I will also refer to the Lessons Learned Officer as the person in the organization with prime responsibility for processing lessons.

For clarity, I use the term “observation” for an item raised at an After Action Review, and “lesson” for an evaluated conclusion leading to an action plan. This follows the OILS (Observations, Insights, Lessons) methodology as used by emergency service organizations and the military. In this methodology, observations are taken at face value, recorded, and evaluated. Observations are then grouped into Insights (a conclusion drawn from the observations) and these are grouped into a Lesson (what we learned). However, in commercial and industrial organizations, After Action Reviews lead directly to identified lessons.

**BACKGROUND**

In 2008, the Construction Industry Institute (CII) Knowledge Management Committee designated lessons learned as a CII Best Practice based on the benefits identified in a study of more than 100 surveys from 70 organizations. Of the companies surveyed, 62% reported having somewhat effective lessons learned programs, 8% effective, 20% neutral and 10% not effective. The same study identified quantifiable measures of improvement resulting from a Lessons Learned Program: 15% base costs, safety improvements from 50-300%, and the improvement of Key Performance Indicator trends (CII, 2012).

In that survey we see an under-achievement in effectiveness of Lessons Learned – even when the quantifiable benefits are substantial, as outlined by Milton (2013). The Knoco survey discussed below indicates that this condition of under-achievement is consistent in other sectors.

**METHOD**

Knoco is a worldwide group of Knowledge Management consultants. It conducted a non-academic research survey of Lessons Learned implementations in 80 organizations. The paper survey was supplemented by an on-line version and the cumulative worldwide results were aggregated to form a set of 62 responses which are summarized below. Of those, 29 were multinational companies, 14 were from United Kingdom and the rest from various companies. The major industries were Public Administration and Safety, Defence (12), Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (11) and Mining, Oil and Gas (10) and 29 from other industry groups.

The results from the survey were validated through conversations with individuals involved in Lessons Learned across Australia during the specification analysis stage associated with the
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