Chapter 10
Why Do Lessons Learned Often Fail?
An Analysis of Experiences

Ian Fry

Knoco Australia Pty Ltd, Australia

ABSTRACT

Organisations know they should do lessons learned. Standards like ISO9001 and ISO30401 say they should. Many try; few succeed. Traditionally, the first answer to the question is "lessons were observed, but not learned," which reflects meaningful action was not taken as a result of the reported lesson. A lesson may have been identified, but nothing changed. As a result, learning did not happen. So why is this so? It is important to identify the ways in which the process towards effective lesson learning is becoming lost within the stages and how knowledge practitioners and those responsible for lessons learned can best help. This chapter will attempt to drill down on this answer, concentrating on the processes deployed and the real-world issues around the lesson-learning process.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations that are looking to improve their bottom line, reduce costly repeat mistakes, and make use of their organisational memory need a lessons-learned practice. Organisations looking to leverage international expertise and standards use the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) standards to benchmark their companies' operations, and to set goals for continuous improvement. The ISO30401-2018 Knowledge Management outlines the requirements for the management system around Knowledge Management. The definitions from this standard have been improved and added to ISO30400 – Human Resource Management – Vocabulary. It defines lessons-learned as "changes in behaviour as a result of learning or of recommendations from experience" (p. 28). The intent is clearly to affect future actions. This intention is not always emphasized, leading to the lessons-learned initiative being seen as a negative "inquiry" or even "witch hunt" where blame is associated. Creating a no-blame environment is fundamental to success, and the chapter discusses this. The failure to change behaviour is at the heart

of failure in lessons learned. This chapter will explore the reasons for the gap between an identified issue and the lack of a change in behaviour.

Knoco (www.knoco.com) runs a tri-annual Global Knowledge Management Survey (Milton, 2020), and the 2020 results concerning an optional section on lessons learned (100 responses out of 453 total responses for the whole survey) showed that respondents scored the effectiveness of their Lessons Learned program at 58% (56% in 2017) ranging from 36% in Finance and Insurance up to 66% in Utilities. A custom-built lessons learned system was rated the most effective storage method. Additional independent self-assessed online surveys on lessons learned run by the author suggested an average satisfaction rate of 43% from 2,500 responses. Many organisations are interested in implementing lessons-learned systems to improve the effectiveness of their organisation; however, they struggle to see success with the system.

This chapter steps through the real-world issues behind the perceived failure of lessons-learned from the starting point of management recognition of the regime through to practical problems implementing action plans. Common challenges with implementing lessons learned are explored, such as the lack of a defined and mature lessons management system, as well as organisational cultures that prevent the necessary organisational learning muscle so that lessons learned can be applied to established practices. The major section of the chapter examines the process in detail, highlighting typical reasons for "failure." The chapter also canvasses an observed phenomenon where "Business as Usual" does not include the opportunity, capacity, and need for improvement, which mitigates against lessons learning. For organisations to achieve success with a lessons-learned regime, the metaphor of a Knowledge Supply Chain is used to illustrate a similarity between an established process and regime; and what needs to happen with lessons-learned so that they are successfully implemented within organisations. Each step is discussed in detail so that lessons learned can provide the organisation with a valuable return on investment.

BACKGROUND

Why do Lessons-Learned?

It is generally accepted that organisations should learn from experience. Lesson-learned initiatives are typically implemented as debrief sessions after projects and other events within organisations so that teams can learn from what went well or what could be improved upon for future initiatives (O'Dell & Hubert, 2011). The intention is that the organisation will benefit from reviewing their actions and will learn from their experience, bringing about greater outcomes in the future. Birkenshaw and Haas (2016) have conducted research over ten years at more than 50 companies and see a positive ratio where the benefits of collecting lessons learned and actioning them outweigh the cost of failure and the cost of collecting lessons. This practice is the standard measure of return on investment for lessons learned. Companies that adopt suitable cultural supports for the lessons learned initiative are more likely to see these benefits.

How do lessons learned Work?

Lessons-learned are:

Collaborative sessions [that] allow project stakeholders to discuss:

- what went well (especially any new tools or methods that produced positive results),
- what went wrong (especially issues that the team could have mitigated or avoided), and

Related Content

Strategically-Focused Enterprise Knowledge Management
Robert J. Mocklerand Dorothy G. Dologite (2002). *Knowledge Mapping and Management (pp. 14-22).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategically-focused-enterprise-knowledge-management/25375

Internet Support for Knowledge Management Systems
Murray E. Jennex (2008). *Knowledge Management: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 564-570).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/internet-support-knowledge-management-systems/25119

Developing and Aligning a Knowledge Management Strategy: Towards a Taxonomy and a Framework
Jean-Pierre Booto Ekioneaand Deborah E. Swain (2008). *International Journal of Knowledge Management (pp. 29-45).*
www.irma-international.org/article/developing-aligning-knowledge-management-strategy/2719

A Holistic Approach to Innovation and Fostering Intrapreneurship
Aaron W. Smith, Nayem Rahman, M. Abu Salehand Saima Akhter (2019). *International Journal of Knowledge-Based Organizations (pp. 62-79).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-holistic-approach-to-innovation-and-fostering-intrapreneurship/224040

An Experiment of Information Elaboration in Mediated Knowledge Transfer
Kelly J. Fadel, Alexandra Durcikovaand Hoon S. Cha (2011). *Global Aspects and Cultural Perspectives on Knowledge Management: Emerging Dimensions (pp. 311-328).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/experiment-information-elaboration-mediated-knowledge/54096