

Lessons Learnt

What are Lessons Learnt?

The formulation of lessons is the collection, validation, consolidation and finally documentation of experiences, developments, hints, mistakes and risks found during a project or programme. Drawing Lessons Learnt makes sense at the end of any project, activity and work phase. Doing so not only gives credit to the efforts made, it also leads to a valuable selection of information that can be useful in the planning and preparation of new endeavours. The analysis of a series of Lessons Learnt in a sequence of projects can yield ideas for improving project management in an organization in general. Lessons Learnt are drawn first and foremost at an individual level. In a team these (often diametrically different) individual lessons can be consolidated into Lessons Learnt by the team. Likewise Lessons Learnt by various teams can be consolidated and made useful for the whole organization.

From the individual Lesson Learnt ...

Lessons Learnt have a lot to do with making mistakes and avoiding making the same mistakes again.

Making mistakes is normal business in life. We have to try out what works best in any new situation we are facing. It is likely that we will not find the optimal way in the first go. In such a trial and error approach making mistakes is normal. Making mistakes is one important source for lessons (to be) learnt. The question is: How many times do we have to repeat the same mistake to recognize it as a mistake and to learn a lesson?

Two main questions are behind Lessons Learnt:

- “Did we do the right thing?”*
- “Did we do it right?”*

We learn lessons based on good or bad experience. We tend to repeat, imitate or transfer a good experience into new contexts; we try to avoid a bad experience in future. Learning lessons most often implies an analysis of the situation, the frame conditions and the specific elements that made it a success or a failure.

The concrete result of a lesson learnt is most often a recipe, a slogan, a guideline, a procedure, combined with memories of a concrete situation. Lessons Learnt are most often – consciously or unconsciously – based on and combined with perceiving and valuing: We liked or disliked an experience for some reasons. We perceive one aspect as important, while others are less important in our perception.

... to a Lesson Learnt by the team and ...

In a team, the situation becomes more complex. The team members often draw different lessons after having gone through the same process. Different perception and different value-systems lead to different Lessons Learnt. Lessons Learnt in a team need sharing different views and values, discussion and consolidation of differences.

A team intending to identify Lessons Learnt must refer the reflection process to agreed upon objectives. A common reference grid is a prerequisite for common Lessons Learnt.

... by the organization

What is true for a team is even more true for an organization. The organization has to respond to different interests. These interests materialize at different levels. The step from individuals to team Lessons Learnt will be repeated from the team to the organizational level: The lesson learnt by a team, may not be identical with the lesson learnt by the organization. In an organization, strategic considerations and systemic effects may lead to drawing different conclusions from those of a team or individuals.

Seven steps for learning lessons in a team

1. Clarify a) the area for which Lessons Learnt are to be drawn, b) who (else) could have an interest in these lessons.
2. Delineate the system boundaries (project, area of activity, action-learning).
3. Then formulate guiding questions corresponding to the above.
4. Collect (individual) answers to these questions and any other spontaneous idea.
5. Consolidate individual lessons into shared lessons (team, organization).
6. Describe the Lessons Learnt (and the surrounding setting) in an attractive and well-structured way.
7. Make Lessons Learnt accessible to all interested persons.