

# The Value of Lessons Learned

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In common usage the term LL means, something I learned through an experience I've had that will cause me to act differently in the future. We learn lessons in obvious ways, for example, we ask someone for help, to which they agree, and then find they don't come through – lesson: "I won't ask her for help again." And in more subtle ways, as when over time we feel we've finally mastered how to produce the quality of report that a demanding editor or boss wants - lesson: "Okay, now I see what I need to do."

In our own minds we usually frame lessons learned as instructions to ourselves that are both action oriented and future oriented – they are not just descriptions of what happened but guidance for our future. Lessons learned are in fact one of the most important ways we learn, grow and change. We greatly value those lessons of experience and they become a part of our sense of self.

The US Army took this valuable every day behavior to a new level when, in the 1970's, it formalized it into the After Action Review (AAR). In each AAR session the army drew out three levels of lessons:

1. Lessons for the platoon (or battalion or company) that would lead it to take more effective action the next time it was engaged in a similar maneuver - typically a facilitator wrote these lessons on a flip chart for everyone to see
2. Individual lessons that each soldier learned, that would lead him/her to act more effectively the next time that soldier was involved in a similar maneuver - each soldier carried a pocket notebook to write these lessons down during the group meeting
3. Lessons that could be generalized for the use of others – a subset of what was learned in the meeting was sent to the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) to be made available to other platoons.

Formalizing lessons learned, as the Army did, is useful because, let's face it, we don't often take the time to pause and think through, "Now what did I learn out of that experience?" "What would I do differently next time?" Consequently, we frequently find ourselves making the same mistakes over and over again – and kicking ourselves for not having learned the first time.

Even for individuals, the reflection process is more effective when it is formalized, for example, keeping a journal or holding a regularly scheduled conversation with a colleague or mentor who can help the individual think through the lessons. **We learn when we talk** applies to understanding what we have gained out of an experience. As the saying goes, "Experience is inevitable, learning is not." Turning experience into learning involves an intentional, reflective process.

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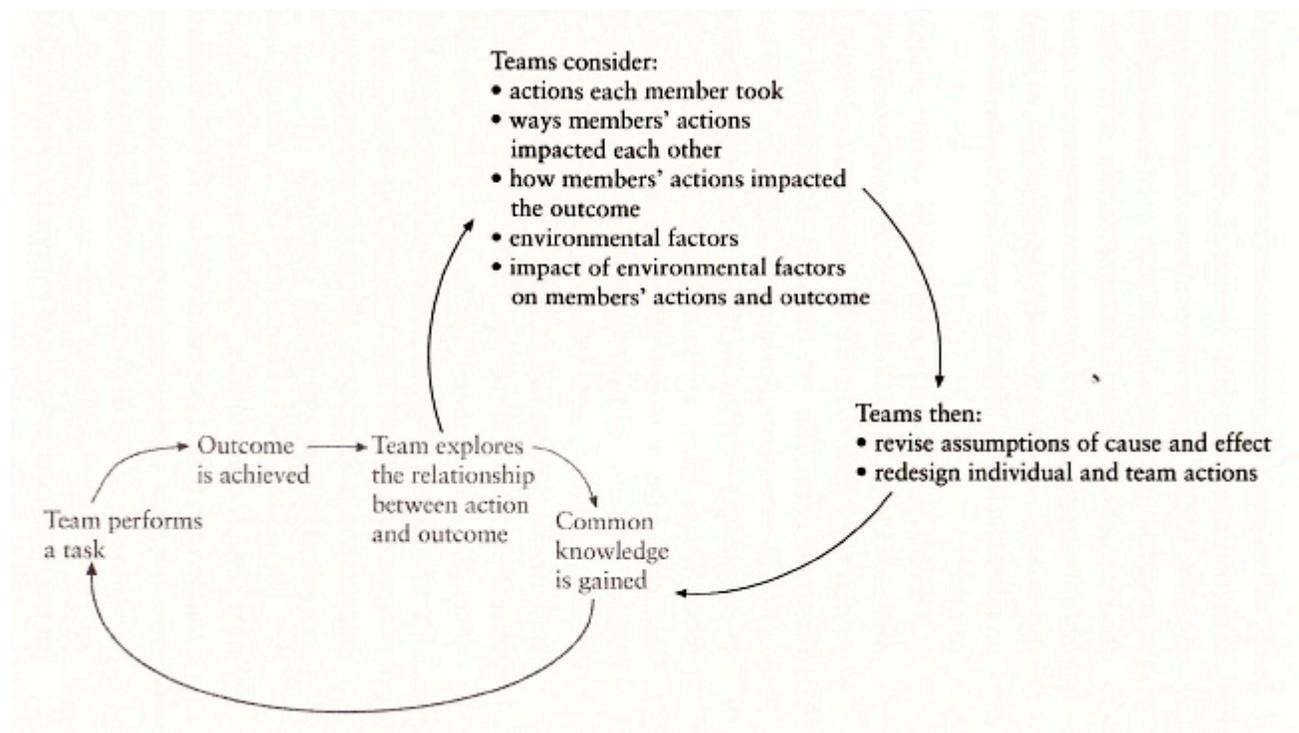
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If it is a group that has conducted a project or team effort, formalizing the lessons learned process is critical. Individual reflection is not enough for a group to improve. After all, in a team or group project it is not just the actions of each individual team member that makes it work, it is also the interaction – how one person's action impacts (delays or facilitates) another. The interplay between team members in a basketball game is a useful analogy – the star can't make the goal without the help of teammates that get the ball to him at the right time.

The relationship between cause and effect is always complex. Most of the outcomes of a team's actions have multiple causes and it takes the thinking of the whole team to tease those cause and effect relationships out. A group discussion moves the knowledge each individual holds into a group or public space where it can then be integrated and made sense of by the whole team. The team then draws on the shared knowledge the next time it takes action.

This diagram borrowed from my book *Common Knowledge* (p.36), illustrates this concept.



Different organizations have given different names to the process they use to learn from experience. The Army term is After Action Review (AAR). NASA uses Pause and Learn (PAL). The Emergency Preparedness Community term is Hot Wash. Regardless of the name, each has guidelines in place to make such meetings more effective than just having a group of people tossing out ideas. All of us have experienced debriefs or postmortems that were a great waste of time. Here are some general guidelines that help lessons learned meetings be more effective:

- \* Meetings to construct lessons are held as soon as possible after the outcome because memory fades quickly
- \* If the project is lengthy, lessons learned meetings are held at milestones along the way
- \* Meetings focus only on the team/project lessons learned, not on other issues the group may be facing
- \* Meetings are brief – it is not a meeting to solve a problem only to tease out what was learned
- \* They focus on what went well as well as what could have been improved.
- \* Everyone involved in the action is there to contribute to the lessons – no one is too junior or too senior to participate
- \* It is framed as a meeting to learn, not to judge – so no recriminations
- \* Meetings have a structure and a standard set of questions the group will address
- \* There is a facilitator to keep the group focused. Often it is a team member

who has had some training in that organization's lessons learned methodology. Typically, the group's leader participates but does not facilitate.

When KM began to gain prominence in the early 90's organizations borrowed the idea from the Army and lessons learned became one of the early KM practices. Over time lessons learned became so focused on transferring knowledge to others that organizations tended to ignore the greatest value, what the individuals and teams had learned for themselves.

The transfer part is very tricky. What organizations found is what we already knew as individuals: that although lessons, that are learned first-hand, are incredibly impactful, it is very hard to transfer those lessons to someone else. From our own experience as parents, trying to share our lessons from the past with our children, we know how difficult it is to make that transfer. As our children tell us, "But Mom, things are different now than when you were growing up."

So all those repositories of lessons learned that we built in the early days of KM just didn't work very well and lessons learned took on a bad name within organizations. But it is critical that we not overlook the most important way lessons learned are useful, which is for the group that has achieved an outcome, successful or not, to really come to understand how that happened. In the end, unless the originating group has gained a thorough understanding for themselves, anything they transfer to others will be inaccurate.

**The greatest value of lessons learned is for those who took the action.**