

Guidance on identifying and documenting “Lessons Learned”

Rick Davies, Tuesday, 18 August 2009

Purpose

This Guidance note is intended for the use of GTZ and UNICEF when completing final reports on their work with the SISKES, IMHI and WCHPP projects in Indonesia. It is planned that both organisations, along with their Indonesian partners, will make presentations on lessons learned from these projects, in IMET facilitated workshops to be held in October 2009 (SISKES) and February 2010 (IMHI and WCHPP). Details of the structure of the Lessons Learned sessions will be provided in advance.

What is a Lesson Learned?

The structure

At its simplest form, a lesson learned is a statement with this type of structure

- **If** you do....**then**....will happen

Ideally it will have third part to it, describing the context

- **If** you do....**and** these conditions are present....**then**will happen

The same kind of simple logic statements should be found in a well designed Logical Framework description of a project design: ***If these Outputs are delivered, and these Assumptions are correct, then these Outcomes will happen***. While in the Logical Framework this type statement describes a plan, a Lessons Learned statement should describe what actually happened. There is also a correspondence here with the approach taken by Pawson and Tilley’s school of Realistic Evaluation, where evaluations try to identify and test hypotheses about significant combinations of *context, mechanism, and outcome*¹.

In its more complex form, a Lesson Learned could be told in the form of a story, which describes the context, what happened there and what were the consequences. Lessons learned told via stories are likely to be remembered, and passed on.

But lessons learned can also be summarised in the form of a headline, which seeks to capture the story. These can aid remembrance of a lesson but are often at the cost of contextual information. “*Presence of Field Office staff leads to reduction in project conditionalities*” was a headline for a proposed lessons learned within the African Development Bank, in the context of an organisation-wide a decentralisation initiative. The headline has an “if...then...” structure, but no information about the context.

Some criteria for good Lessons Learned

1. Based on experience

The U.S. Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) describes lessons learned as “*Knowledge gained through experience, which if shared, would benefit the work of others*”²

¹ See Nick Tilley’s overview at http://evidence-basedmanagement.com/research_practice/articles/nick_tilley.pdf

² U.S. Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL): <http://call.army.mil/>

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Other definitions also capture the necessity for the lesson learned to be based on experience:

- *A Lesson Learned is knowledge and experience—positive or negative—derived from actual incidents*³
- *A lessons learned is knowledge or understanding gained by experience*⁴

And the inverse: *A lesson is not simply restating or paraphrasing existing doctrine, policy, process, etc. This does not qualify as an appropriate and bona fide lessons learned.*⁵

2. Makes a difference

Lessons learned are *“Knowledge derived from the implementation and evaluation of a program that can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses of program design and implementation. This information is likely to be helpful in modifying and improving program functions in the future”*⁶

3. Useful to others

*“Knowledge gained through experience, which if shared, would benefit the work of others”*⁷

*“For me, the result of a Lessons-Learned Session (LLS) must be something that is ACTIONABLE and USEFUL for the next person who will perform the same or similar activity or project”*⁸.

4. Have wide but not universal applicability

Lessons Learned is *“Learning from experience that is applicable to a generic situation, not just to a specific situation”*⁹

*Generalizations based on evaluation experiences with projects, programs, or policies that abstract from the specific circumstances to broader situations. Frequently, lessons highlight strengths or weaknesses in preparation, design, and implementation that affect performance, outcome, and impact*¹⁰ (OECD-DAC)

Lessons Learned are not the same as recommendations. Recommendations usually refer to very specific situations¹¹. On the other hand, statements about morality or physical laws usually more claim more universal applicability. A good Lessons Learned statement will describe where it is most applicable i.e. in what contexts.

5. Are verifiable.

Not only are they based on experience, but there is enough information provided to

³ www.ncemf.org/.../iverson%20-%20lessons%20learned%20info%20sharing.pdf -

⁴ www.dtic.mil/ndia/2004cmmi/CMMIT2Tue/LessonsLearnedtc3.pdf

⁵ www.dtic.mil/ndia/2004cmmi/CMMIT2Tue/LessonsLearnedtc3.pdf

⁶ <http://www.epa.gov/evaluate/glossary/l-esd.htm>

⁷ U.S. Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL): <http://call.army.mil/>

⁸ Dr. Serafin D. Talisayon, email posted on km4dev-l, 12 Aug 2009

⁹ www.globalhivmeinfo.org/Pages/Glossary.aspx

globalhivmeinfo.org/DigitalLibrary/Digital%20Library/Glossary%20of%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20Terms.doc

¹⁰ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/29/21/2754804.pdf>

¹¹ Including who should take action on what by when

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enable someone else to check the facts and to see if the interpretation of the experience is plausible. At the very least, the author of the Lessons Learned statement should be identified.

In Michael Quinn Patton's Utilization Focused Evaluations (4th ed) he defines high-quality lessons learned as *'triangulated knowledge confirmed from multiple sources that can be applied to future action'*. This is very close to how some would define "Best Practices"

Learning from other people's experiences of identifying "lessons learned"

1. In 2008 the WCHPP was subject to a Mid-Term Review. This included a Lessons Learned exercise¹².
 - The exercise started by asking people to complete a sentence starting with "WCHPP will be more effective if ----". The problem with this approach, in my view, is that it does not encourage reflection on what happened in the past, the focus is on the future. I prefer the retrospective questions asked by Catholic Relief Services below (section 3 below).
 - The answers varied. Many were of this type. . "WCHPP will be more effective if UNICEF and GOI budgeting is more predictable" This has an "if...then..." structure, but in reverse. Being in reverse is not such a problem. The main problem is that it does not tell us much about the "then..." bit. In what way will WCHPP be more effective?
 - Some answers were more informative. They had more detailed "if...then.." structures. For example: *(If) They make clear their replication strategy – (then) it would aide implementation, monitoring and evaluation.* This type of statement would be of extra value if it was then backed up by some description of the project experience and why it led to this conclusion
2. In early 2009 the SISKES project was reviewed by IMET. In turn the IMET team was required to complete the DFID required Annual Review report on SISKES. In the format for that report there is a requirement for Lessons Learned. Here is one example of a lesson identified by the IMET team:
 - *Encourage informal engagements: The formation of an informal "Think Tank" of interested participants from partner organisations has provided an extra and possibly more enduring dimension to the relationships within the project. It has provided an opportunity for interested stakeholders on the Gol side, where they may not have had official opportunities to engage, and it has provided some continuity of engagement for others, when their official roles have changed, moving them away from any official interaction with the project .*
 - This example uses a headline to capture the main message, in the form of an imperative, and then the paragraph underneath explains the details of what happened, and what were the consequences (i.e. if...then...).
 - How could it be improved? If this Lessons Learned was to be of any use to people not familiar with the SISKES project it would need more contextual information, about the project. And ideally, maybe a statement about where this

¹² The comments made here are based on the PowerPoint presentation and have not taken into account any discussion that may have been structured around them

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approach may not work

3. Catholic Relief Services have provided the following advice on Lessons Learned¹³:

- *One can simply think of a lesson learnt in this way, “What would we do differently next time? And what would we do the same?”*
- *Do not write the lesson only as an observation, description or a recommendation that lacks justification. Justify the lesson with proof of why it is valid.*
- *Explain the lesson in the context of the project. For it to be useful to others, they need to understand the situation in which it occurred to know if might be appropriate or useful for them.*

4. Paul Crawford has suggested a more intuitive way of identifying Lessons Learned, by focusing on the sense of surprise, as is captured in this quote:

- *“Learning results from being surprised: detecting a mismatch between what was expected to happen and what actually did happen. If one understands why the mismatch occurred (diagnosis) and is able to do things in a way that avoids a mismatch in the future (prescription), one has learned.” (Gharajedaghi, J. (1999) Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos And Complexity, Oxford).*
- One can see the “if...and...then...” statement structure introduced at the beginning of this Guidance Note as a prescription.

5. Members of the MandE NEWS and KM4D email lists have volunteered these comments on their experiences with Lessons Learned

- *The initial lessons learned is a reflective exercise by the people involved. Subsequent lessons learned are when other people gain some insight or process improvement as a consequence of reading (or speaking with the relevant person) the lessons learned from a repository. (Brad Hinton)*
- *With few exceptions they [Lessons Learned] almost always are assessing something well before maturity or take-off. If one is not careful, developing lessons learned and best practices too early in the natural developmental cycle is like judging a symphony on the overture... (Tony Prior)*
- *"Lessons collected" are not "lessons learned". You can have a massive pile of lessons (even well-written ones) that no one uses (Matt Moore)*
- *"A lessons learned system that focuses only on written documents is unlikely to work. Documents should act as aide-memoires to those who had the experiences and contact points for those who need to tap into their experiences." (Matt Moore)*
- *In my experience for a third party, what is interesting about someone else's experience is not what they actually have done or accomplished, but which dillema's they faced, what choices they made and why. Few "good practices" or "lessons learned" that are documented pay enough attention to that in my view. (Rosien Herweijer)*
- *... I think there are very few ways they [Lessons Learned] can be meaningfully shared. In my experience, the use of stories has to be one of the most powerful*

¹³ Catholic Relief Services “WHAT IS A LESSON LEARNT???”

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ways because it allows you to keep enough context to avoid losing some of the key variables/actions at the same time as using a form of communication (narrative) which most people can not only relate to, but enjoy, and it is a form in which a lot of complexity can be built in without fatiguing or boring people (Riff Fulan)

6. My own experience with reading other peoples' Lessons Learned has often been one of boredom. This is not unique. Look for signs of boredom when reading the Lesson Learned, and ask:
- Is the description lacking sufficient detail of what happened, or sufficient explanation of the significance?
 - Has the same thing been said by many others before? If so, how can this Lessons Learned statement add extra understanding on top of what has been said before?
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