

Reflective practice in knowledge management

Reflection is an active process. It involves the examination of past experiences and gaining some conclusions that can inform future activities. Some professions, notably nursing and teaching, often build reflective practices into initial training in order to help establish them as a key component of professional activities. Most of us, however, are rarely introduced to the concept as part of our personal or professional development. However, where there are business drivers to support new ways of working, it may be possible to introduce reflective practices that have long-term benefits to the organisation.

For instance, in August 2003 there was a massive failure in the electricity distribution system in the USA. It had a significant impact on the Internet as primary and secondary servers lost their service and web sites across the world became unavailable. DTE Energy, the parent company of Detroit Edison, had introduced a programme of informal, but structured learning and staff were considering how they might respond more effectively in any similar future situations even whilst working to restore power to over 50 million USA and Canadian citizens. Within 24 hours DTE was able to convene a meeting where it could examine the AAR Observations of key staff members. Those AARs were combined into a collective lesson learned that will enable the company to plan for major training programme for such large-scale emergencies in the future.

After Action Reviews (AAR) were introduced by the US Army to enable its units to adjust their actions on a daily basis in order to get the intended results. There is a good deal of evidence to show that public sector organisations in the USA take lessons learning very seriously since being developed by the Army many years ago and the practice is fairly wide spread.

An AAR is a slight misnomer as they can be applied during ongoing projects as well as after key activities. They involve asking a short series of questions that enable participants to reflect on their experiences. The questions are:

- What should have happened?
- What actually happened?
- What were the differences?
- What did we learn?

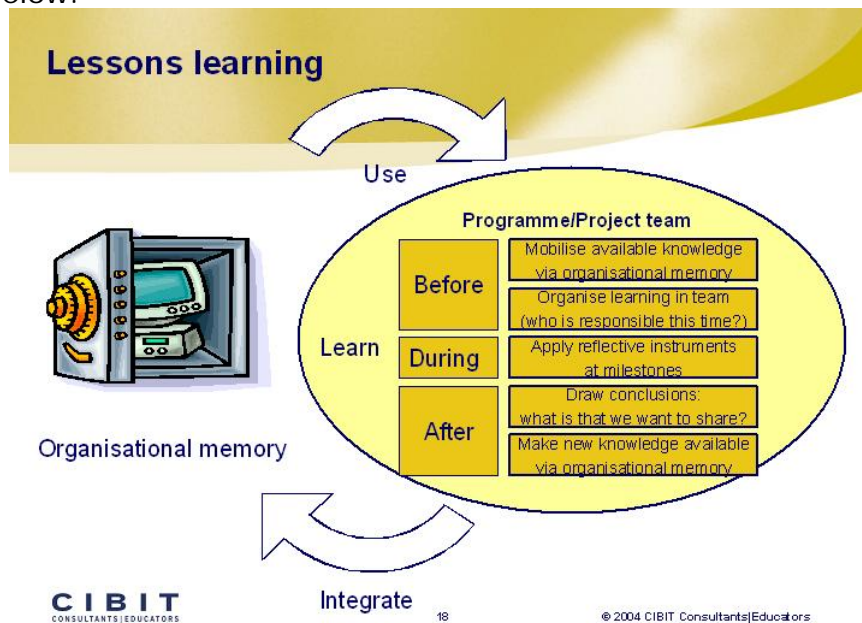
AARs are simple and do not take too much time although in their initial uptake it make sense to facilitate the process ensuring participants do not jump naturally to the final stage before establishing the foundations for the lessons learned.

Undertaken by a team involved in an activity, they create a collective set of lessons learned that will enable the team to enhance the future performance of similar or related activities. However, if they are to help other teams, in other locations, or parts of the business then knowledge

management practitioners have gained experience as to how they might be programmed so as to ensure an optimisation of the investment in time and effort to undertake the reflection in the first place.

Lessons learning can be applied in most organisational settings including the example of crisis management at DTE Energy. However, imagine a scenario where the team responsible for the launch of a new product or service had made its lessons available to others. It is quite possible that further new product development can be enhanced through better processes and thereby getting the product to the market in quicker time.

As we all learn every day and then this learning is captured, perhaps within an AAR, then the lessons need to be organised in a way that is meaningful for others in the organisation. Some form of storage system is required – a database where lessons can be searched and located. It makes sense for someone to take the responsibility for making the lessons more visible through a communication programme than will enable people to know the types of lessons available and how they might be of benefit. Finally, the lessons need to be integrated into working practices. For example, it make sense that prior to the commencement of a new project, the project leader analysis unavailable lessons in order that the new project does not replicate past mistakes or draws on the successes of other relevant projects. This mobilisation of knowledge is illustrated in the figure below.



With clear and demonstrable business benefits lessons learned programmes can play a part in establishing learning as a key performance driver. Reflection need not be an individual activity, but can be experienced as a collective process although the two need not be mutually exclusive. There are a number of different reflective practices supported in knowledge management programmes including Significant Milestone Reviews, Post Project Reviews and Peer Assists. However, not all organisations have coherent and systematic approaches to knowledge management. Where knowledge management programmes do not yet exist in the organisation, the skills and attributes needed to establish

lessons learned programmes include the ability to facilitate an AAR process; an understanding of organisational learning needs; an effective use of existing communication channels and the motivation to make learning opportunities a part of the very fabric of the organisation. Surely, this is a role for HRD professionals. If not you, who?

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