



*The* **vision**  
*to stay ahead*

**Sharing knowledge  
Fresh thinking on an age old  
problem**

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## 1 Introduction

In general, lessons learned are rarely learned. Research and general knowledge about what causes programme and project failure has abounded for years, yet the same things keep happening, therefore what can we do to help?

As an example of this problem, for the last 20 years in the UK, the world of best practice (originated by the UK government) illustrates the issue. We wrote Managing Successful Programmes (MSP®) but it was written on the assumption that audiences already had experience of programme management, understood programme management and wanted to improve. The reality, however, is that people who take the course are new to the topic, spend a week studying to pass an exam and never look at the book again.

The work of P3M3® has shown that although the knowledge has been absorbed temporarily for the examination, it is not sufficiently understood to enable deployment in the real world as the courses are attended by inexperienced individuals unable or unauthorised to deploy the knowledge they have gained in the real world.

## 2 What is a lesson learned?

Lessons learned as a term in itself is part of the problem, by definition, it assumes someone is teaching and someone is listening, and that the learning is being validated. This clearly doesn't happen, instead it has become an overused cliché that covers a range of things, including:

1. Generic statements about what happened, often covering the blindingly obvious which under or overestimates the audience
2. Something that the author wants to boast about to promote themselves
3. Brain dumps of random information that make little sense to others
4. Statements that are too complex for the audience or are unique to a specific scenario
5. Written as reflective lessons for the host, not as advice or guidance to others, so it has lack of meaning to the listener.

## 3 Why do we fail to learn from the past?

What is happening is people are trying to share experiences, often with an unknown audience. The problems that face programme and projects are common but the ways to deal with them can vary depending on the context and capability of the team.

When lesson sharing is undertaken face to face with the right audience it is likely to work. Here are some ideas about why this is such a challenge.

1. Lessons are written at the end, rather than at the time so can be out of date very quickly. Lessons are written generically, with little thought for the audience and as a self-glorifying brain dump
2. Individuals have little incentive to learn from the past as organisations value heroism, and in particular, heroic avoidance of failure. Organisations' cultural values; do they value the heroic innovator over the systematic analyst?
3. Critical information is hidden in long wordy documents, so cannot be found.
4. The knowledge has to trigger some emotional relationship to a personal experience to be able to stimulate the recognition of value.

5. Unconscious incompetence; if people don't know what they don't know they will not value advice from others as it appears out of context. People who can benefit from the lesson are often not listening or incentivised to listen and the reward process doesn't encourage them to research them.
6. People have biased views, as with all communications, the source of the message may affect the ability to process it.
7. Teams want to create solutions rather than re-use, thus they repeat the mistakes of the past.
8. Knowledge management only works in mature organisations or teams, the ability to acknowledge, disseminate and act on lessons is characteristic of high maturity.
9. The valuable nugget is rarely the lesson documented, it is a small piece of insight that when connected to other information generates the valuable piece of knowledge, if is very difficult to design a process to handle this.

At the core of the problem is that organisations do not value knowledge and in general, have no Knowledge Management Strategy, as such it is a peripheral activity. When it is done is often seen as a routine piece of bureaucracy rather than a critical value adding activity. Accountability for knowledge development and deployment is rarely defined.

#### 4 Magnificent Seven – our tips for improvement.

Based on our observations from various pieces of work recently, here are our seven tips to improve the way you manage your knowledge sharing in the future.

1. **Knowledge is fragile** – it can be easily lost with a resulting impact on the organisations, so it should be regarded as a risk
2. **Knowledge should be put into context** – often it is as important to understand the context within which the lesson was learned as the lesson itself e.g. the insight may only be of value in certain situations and cannot be applied widely
3. **Knowledge should be “showered”**, namely lots of sound bite nuggets may be picked or register an idea that may become valuable at a later date or in a different context to which the “receiver” is operating at that moment.
4. **Focus on the audience – vary channels to find them.** We know that we learn and listen in different ways (NLP for example), so the “broadcast” channels need to reflect this. The approach of one dimensional documents in a digital world is outdated and ineffective.
5. **Incentivise individuals to re-use** – very few organisations reward the deployment of experience, which means there is no incentive not to “re-invent” the wheel. High calibre teams tend to focus on problem solving through invention rather than research, Belbin team roles theory is relevant to this, over reliance on certain team types will create different effects.
6. **Nurture the role of human capital** – knowledge moves around within the heads of individuals and teams. New people joining the teams have access to this knowledge and people leaving the team take it with them to other teams. The Tuckman model for team performance illustrates how knowledge and relationships mature, the “reforming” element of the model reflects the need to share knowledge with the new member.
7. **Improve the knowledge curation** – the specific management of knowledge in and out of the organisation should have ownership and be incentivised to deploy. Once ownership is defined then a strategy that fits the organisation can be developed.

If just one word from this article triggers a thought or an idea that improves your performance, at any time in the future, then it will have been worthwhile.

This article has been written by Aspire Europe Ltd, Rod Sowden, Managing Director of Aspire Europe Ltd and Lead Author for MSP® and P3M3® and author of a number of other books on how to deploy programme management effectively.

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