I have been thinking a lot recently about "what is a lesson learned", largely in the context of our company offering on lesson-learning (for more on lesson learning, go here, or see my book).

There’s a lot of fuzziness about the topic, and this can really hamper the delivery of value through lessons identification, sharing and re-use. Let’s start with the question - "What is a lesson learned". Here are a few definitions, many taken from the web, many of them (as we will see) flawed.

- “A Lesson Learned is knowledge or understanding gained by experience that has a significant impact for an organisation. The experience may be either positive or negative. Successes are also sources of Lessons Learned. Lessons Learned Systems tend to be more organisation-specific than Alert Systems”.

- “A Lesson Learned documents the experience gained during a project. These lessons come from working with or solving real-world problems. Collecting and disseminating lessons learned helps to eliminate the occurrence of the same problems in future projects”.

- “a potential mode of failure (a risk) and the possible actions to mitigate that risk”.

- A lesson learned is an experience or outcome of a particular course of action -- either positive or negative -- that is important enough to be communicated to one's peers.

- “The knowledge acquired from an innovation or an adverse experience that causes a worker or an organization to improve a process or activity to work safer, more efficiently, or with higher quality”

- Knowledge derived from the reflection, analysis and,conceptualisation of experience that has potential to improvefuture action

We can conclude from this that lessons are knowledge, and that they come from experience, and that they can help, or impact, the work of others. But does that make them "Learned"?

There is a very valuable distinction to be made between Lesson Learned and Lessons Identified, and anyone who has worked in this field for a while will have met companies which keep identifying the same lesson over and over, but never learning it (see excellent picture above). I would suggest that many of the definitions above are for Lessons Identified rather
than Lessons Learned. Look at the language in the definitions; "collecting and disseminating lessons learned helps" - yes, disseminating lessons may help, but what about applying them? "Important enough to be communicated to one's peers" - what about "important enough to be re-applied by one's peers"?

Let's look at the steps a lesson has to go through before it can be considered to be "Learned".

1. Reflect on Experience. Think back (and discuss as a team) what happened.
2. Identify learning points. Where was there a difference between what was planned, and what actually happened? Either a positive or a negative difference.
3. Analyse. Why was there a difference? What were the root causes?
4. Generalise. What is the learning point? What should be done in future activity to avoid the pitfall, or repeat the success? At this stage we have a Lesson Identified. It will be a useful lesson, if others can learn from it, and for others to learn from it, it needs to be instructional.

At this stage, let me have a short digression on "What makes a good Lesson". We tend to use the phrase "Specific Actionable Recommendation to describe a good lesson.

- A lesson needs to be specific enough that you can learn from it. Let's have none of the "Well, Duh!" lessons, please. I read a Lesson last week that said "To do X properly will require time, resources and effort". Well, Duh! And there was me, thinking it could be done in no time, with no resources or effort!
- It needs to be actionable - people need to be able to take action. So none of the woolly waffles such as "A better system for Y needs to be in place". How Better? What sort of Better? What elements need to be Better? Who needs to put it in place?
- Finally it needs to be a recommendation, rather than an observation. I went through some documents recently which were purported to be lessons learned documents from an absolutely crucial project, and half of the "lessons" were observations. They had not got past step 2 above. They were statements such as "The team encountered great difficulty in Z, blah blah". Well, why did they encounter difficulty? What was the root cause behind that difficulty? And what would their recommendation be for other teams, to avoid that difficulty?
There has been no analysis, so there can be no specific actionable recommendation.

My conclusion is that a Lesson Identified needs to be "A recommendation, based on analysed experience, from which others can learn in order to improve their performance". We are still not at a "Lesson Learned" as there needs to be one more step - step 5.

5. Take action. As I explained here, a lesson needs to be accompanied by an action if it is to be considered Learned. A document, a procedure, a policy, a structure, a budget, or an order, needs to be changed. Then this change needs to be communicated, so working practices can be changed as a result. If nothing changes, nothing has been learned.

So I would like to propose this definition. A Lesson Learned, is a change in personal or operational behaviour as a result of experience. Ideally this will be a permanent, institutionalised change, but we know that lessons can be unlearned as well as learned, so I will leave the work "institutionalised" out of the definition for the moment.

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