Pan American Health Organization

World Health Organization

Regional Office for the **Americas**

2. LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned should bring about a change in the organization's procedures. Organizational learning should translate into the updating or development of standards, procedures, policies or standard operating procedures (SOPs) in an organization.

Title	Lessons Learned (LL)
Version	2nd Revision, May 17, 2015
Definition	Lessons learned should bring about a change in the organization's procedures. Organizational learning should translate into the updating or development of standards, procedures, policies or standard operating procedures (SOPs) in an organization.
Objective	To improve or develop formal and informal institutional standards or procedures, policies and practices based on knowledge, visions and experiences, by means of a methodology that systematizes the processes for assessing projects, products, services or events
Expected results	• Organizational learning • Analysis and assessment of programs, processes, projects or activities (including large-scale projects) • Upgrading of processes • Identification of knowledge gaps • Development of methodologies and, when appropriate, creation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) • Identification of training requirements
Premises	• **Goal**: The definition of the main objective of each LL should be constructive and participative in nature and it should be developed based on empirical data, evidence and respecting member's individual experience and vision • **Scope:** The scope of the development of a LL exercise should consider both positive and negative aspects • **Objectivity**: The exercise should be developed avoiding bias towards a specific result • **Effectiveness** : A LL exercise will be effective if the knowledge gained is translated into or incorporated to institutional standards and procedures or policies or technical standards

Procedure

Phase I	Planning	It is important to bear in mind that an LL exercise should be an integral part of the development of a project or activity rather than an isolated element developed at the end of it without a clear objective of what is expected.

1. <u>When to start an LL exercise</u>: Determining when to conduct or when to avoid conducting an LL exercise is as important as the implementation itself. Not every project must include an LL exercise, and its imprecise implementation may result in poor investment of human and financial resources as well as in recommendations adding nothing to the expected value. Some situations that may deserve the development of an LL exercise are the following:

   a. Completion of a project or important stage of a project going through major challenges and requiring a redefinition of objectives or programmatic/budgetary priorities;
   b. Completion of a successful – or failed – project or relevant stage of a project which allows identification and recording of good practices that can be used as a benchmark for similar projects or situations;
   c. Public Health Event (Emergency, Disaster, Campaign, etc.) or situation which may contribute some learning to the institution;

2. <u>Name or title designation</u>: It is advisable that the title should include information on the objective and the <u>specific outcome</u> expected from the LL exercise in order to transmit the expected result in a solid and objective manner.

Proper examples	• Lessons learned about the journalistic coverage of the Vaccination Week in the Americas. • Lessons learned about the humanitarian response to the cholera outbreak in Haiti. • Lessons learned from the first year of the eHealth strategy implementation in Chile.

3. <u>Identification of the topic</u>: It consists of a brief description of the topic intended for analysis in this exercise. It is advisable that the description should include specific data that will be incorporated to the LL exercise and that will enable a focus on the development of debates and the elaboration of final recommendations.

4. <u>Definition of the objective</u>: The objectives of an exercise of Lessons Learned should be oriented towards:

Improving standards and procedures: Lessons learned should bring about a change in the organization's procedures. Organizational learning should translate into the updating or development of standards, procedures, policies or standard operating procedures (SOPs) in an organization.

Assessing large-scale programs, projects or activities: It is important to consider projects facing significant challenges and requiring a redefinition of objectives or programmatic/budgetary priorities. It is also important to consider successful projects or significant stages of a project which allows the identification and recording of good practices that can be used as a benchmark for similar projects or situations.

Identifying knowledge gaps: In order to obtain feedback and learning from a project being carried out and requiring reorientation of objectives or priorities due to a lack of specific knowledge.

Development of methodologies and, when applicable, elaboration of a standard operating procedure (SOP): In order to record experiences and standardize processes that will be new in some cases and adapted in others.

Identification of training requirements: Public Health Event (Emergency, Disaster, Campaign, etc.), project, activity or situation which may contribute some learning to the institution. Learning is regarded as the capacity of modifying standards and procedures to incorporate the result of the Lessons Learned.

5. <u>Definition of Expected Results</u>: It is advisable that they should be defined according to the following concepts: organizational learning, analysis and assessment of programs, processes, projects or activities (including events), upgrading of processes, identification of knowledge gaps, development of methodologies and standard operating procedures and identification of training requirements.

6. <u>Identification of Participants</u>: Identifying people committed to the objective of the exercise is crucial. A combination of decision-makers, project leaders, partners and target audiences should be considered. It is important to identify people with a critical view of the topic. A group of 15 people maximum is advised. All the same, participants must have already been active players of the process from which the LL derives. Otherwise, assessment and conclusions will not come from field experience but from abstract concepts.

7. <u>Identification of audiences</u>: Those who can benefit from the products produced by the LL.

8. <u>Identification of products</u>: Products (standards, norms, policies, procedures, etc.) to be improved or updated based on knowledge gained in a Lessons Learned exercise.

Phase II	**Development**	An exercise of Lessons Learned can be conducted via face-to-face or blended meetings or via an online discussion forum.

How to start: Analyze similar situations, testimonies and documentation that may or should be considered as back-up for the LL exercise. This analysis is important to serve as a basis for discussions and recommendations regarding scientific and technical information and empirical data which will then allow a realistic and sustainable implementation of recommendations.

Type of activity: Depending on the urgency of the expected results and the availability of resources, an exercise of Lessons Learned may be conducted, in the short-term, in a face-to-face or blended meeting. Otherwise, an online discussion forum may be established to allow the development of a medium-term exercise. It is important to bear in mind that an online discussion forum requires increased attention from all the participants and implies a very high risk of not coming to an end. On the other hand, a face-to-face meeting also involves this risk of not coming to the proper end with the information sought.

Type of leadership: It is vital to appoint a facilitator and a rapporteur who prove to be neutral and not involved with the topic or pre-established result. Usually, it is advisable that these people should have not belonged to the project or activity main team.

Type of questions: Just as when developing an effective investigation, or when finding the solution for a specific public health issue, it is essential to previously define the questions to be posed during the exercise. It is important to ensure that the questions are designed in a way that the answers provide specific solutions to the problems raised. The Lessons Learned should produce question-based recommendations such as the following <u>examples</u>:

- *Are the results achieved in the project or event aligned with the objectives set? Otherwise, identify the main obstacles preventing the achievement of the expected results;*

- *Do you think that the project or event target group is satisfied with the achieved results? If not, analyze how to mitigate the risks of having an audience disappointed with your project;*
- *Do you think the standards and procedures in your institution have been effective for the development of the project? If not, recommend what improvements could be made to add efficiency to the administrative processes related to the project or activity implementation.*
- *Was the strategic planning adequate? Include an analysis of scheduled milestones and the return of investment made.*
- *Provide 3 recommendations of aspects to be improved, 3 aspects to be highlighted as positive, 3 negative items, and 3 risks that should be considered in the future.*
- *Do you think the project or activity was developed based on scientific and technical information or evidence?*

Operating rules: It is important to establish the rule for developing an exercise of Lessons Learned. Both in face-to-face, virtual and blended environments, active participation of all members should be promoted. Also, in order to guarantee the achievement of expected results, it is worth to define the following:

- *Before starting, the roles of facilitator, moderator and rapporteur should be defined, and commitment should be made to keep the debate within the framework of expected results;*
- *During development, there is no hierarchy and all participants will have the same right to express their views without feeling pressure for any kind of organizational scheme;*
- *For face-to-face discussions, it is essential that they comply with the prearranged time and the framework of expected results. Debates within the conceptual scope of "Lessons Learned" tend to easily divert from their aim;*
- *In support of the previous situation, it is essential to have tools available for the participants to enhance their contribution without interrupting the pre-established dynamics. The most common tools are known as "parking lot" and they can be face-to-face or virtual;*
- *Interventions should focus on solutions rather than on identification of problems and their nature should be institutional rather than personal;*
- *Pointing out people should be avoided as much as possible, and in case of a topic in relation to someone who could affect future actions, it is advisable to address it outside the plenary session;*
- *All interventions add some value and, therefore, it is essential that the facilitator avoids issuing a value judgment, either positive or negative, of any intervention;*
- *It is central to consider cultural aspects when planning the number of questions to be posed. Some groups tend to be "more talkative" than others and this may determine the success or failure of an exercise of Lessons Learned;*

- *Do not rule out the possibility of conducting a preliminary survey to enable the establishment of some important basis for later debate;*
- *At the end of the event, there must have been 100% participation of members;*
- *If a member does not participate in the event, he/she should be assigned a specific role to guarantee 100% participation of attendees.*
- *Also, there are LLs for each sub-area of the macro process in evaluation. That is, all those who have participated in the experience have their particular LL derived from their own performing experience. In that case, it is necessary to create a logic structure of commitments, functions, or expertise so that everyone, according to their field, can make their contribution.*

Conclusions: In order to obtain a practical and executive report which facilitates the top management to make decisions in the short- and medium-term, the report with conclusions should be executive and include the following elements:

- *The objective and the expected results should be repeated since conclusions will be reviewed by people who may have not participated in the exercise;*
- *In case agreement was not reached in 100% of conclusions and next steps, the report with conclusions should clearly identify: 1) Agreements and 2) Disagreements. In this way, "agreements" can be addressed and the top management will make decisions regarding "disagreements"*
- *The report should include a "recommendations" section divided into: a) Standards and procedures than can be improved or should be developed, b) Knowledge gaps and learning requirements, c) Administrative, technical and managerial issues than need further analysis because they have been an obstacle for the development of the project, and f) model of budgetary and human resources management;*
- *The report should consider a recommendation on "the people" who it should be – fully or partially – shared with. In case of sensitive or confidential information, it should be clearly identified in the report;*
- *The report should include a recommendation on the format and means to be used for dissemination (Intranet, web, social networks, letter, internal memorandum, etc.)*
- *The end of the report should include a list of participants and their specific role;*

Phase III	**Closure**	An exercise of Lessons Learned will be successful and effective when a managerial action is performed after the review of the final report and implementation follow-up.

Managerial actions: The top management should evaluate the report and decide which aspects will be incorporated to the institutions and which will not. They may be fully or partially incorporated or it may occur that no recommendation is accepted; anyway, and

in all cases, it is important to communicate the decision made or the product developed to the staff and the target audiences.

The main actions to be considered are:

- *Recommendations obtained should be reviewed by the top management;*
- *An internal work group should be established for their implementation;*
- *People and entities responsible of each approved recommendation should be identified;*
- *Clear and transparent communication to the staff and target audiences as regards the managerial decision on the report obtained;*
- *Recording, publication and dissemination of results;*

Important remark: In order that the organization culture incorporates the subject of "Lessons Learned" systematically, it is important that a digital repository[1] should be available to save, sort and retrieve them whenever necessary, in an open and standardized fashion. With this aim, the following metadata are suggested:

1. Name or title (See page 2)
2. Associated project (Name of institutional project under evaluation)
3. Main objective (See page 2)
4. Expected results (from the exercise)
5. Type of exercise (Preset table allowing standardization)
6. Thematic area (Preset table allowing standardization)
7. Responsible entity (Preset table allowing standardization)
8. Moderator
9. Facilitator
10. Rapporteur
11. Conclusions
12. Main factors for the project success or failure
13. Recommendations

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[1]It is advisable to place fields no larger than 250 characters in order to induce the participants to be specific. This is also an institutional incentive to record these exercises.