

# LEARNING LESSONS

Capturing and Institutionalizing Lessons  
from Complex Stabilization Efforts

MARCH 23, 2015 | WASHINGTON, D.C.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and the United States Institute of Peace thank the individuals who helped organize the workshop and who made time in their busy schedules to attend and participate in the discussions.

This report provides the ideas and concerns of the workshop participants. It does not reflect consensus or agreement among the attendees, nor does it necessarily reflect the views of SIGAR or USIP.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Establishing a Lessons Learned Project</b>	<b>2</b>
Obtaining Senior Leader Buy-In	2
Determining Lessons Learned Processes	2
Selecting and Prioritizing Issues	4
Asking the Right Questions to Identify Key Lessons	5
Interviewing Key Officials	6
Comparing and Generalizing	6
Framing Lessons and Recommendations	7
<b>Applying the Lessons</b>	<b>8</b>
Identifying the Right Audience	8
Institutionalizing Lessons	9
Tracking Implementation	10
<b>Appendix A: Workshop Participants</b>	<b>11</b>

# LEARNING LESSONS

## INTRODUCTION

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) was created by Congress to help ensure efficient and intelligent use of U.S. resources by monitoring reconstruction efforts and investigating waste, fraud, and abuse. Part of SIGAR's mandate is to provide "independent and objective" recommendations "on policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness" of reconstruction efforts. Through the course of its work, SIGAR recognized that its findings in Afghanistan could be useful in informing and improving U.S. involvement in other reconstruction and stabilization effort. To more systematically capture these lessons, SIGAR established a lessons learned program in late 2014.

The reconstruction effort in Afghanistan has been unprecedented in many regards, including its cost, duration, complexity, insecure operating conditions, and the multitude of U.S. government agencies and donor nations involved in the effort. This diversity makes Afghanistan a fertile case study for extracting lessons applicable to other current and future reconstruction efforts. However, this diversity also presents a challenge in that there are a myriad of potential lessons and many of these lessons cut across the traditional institutional mandates of government agencies. While lessons learned efforts within agencies tend to prioritize identifying lessons where they have jurisdiction and avoid examining lessons that involve a "whole of government" approach, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program relies on its unique interagency mandate to examine and identify those lessons that cut across agency lines.

To understand how we might better approach lessons learned, SIGAR and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) co-hosted a workshop titled "How do U.S. Government Agencies Learn from the Past in Complex Stabilization Operations?" on March 23, 2015, at USIP in Washington, DC. Participants from a range of U.S. government agencies, academia, and think tanks, as well as the United Nations and NATO, attended to share their experiences. This report distills the information shared at the workshop to address two key questions: 1) What are best practices in establishing lessons learned projects and in identifying specific lessons; and 2) Once lessons are identified, how to best translate them into recommendations aimed at institutionalizing this knowledge in agencies and organizations.

Participants at the workshop identified practices that have proven useful in the past, as well as key challenges in identifying lessons and applying them to future efforts. There was agreement that no matter how difficult, it is vital we attempt to identify and learn lessons from our experiences in Afghanistan. The lessons that are emerging from these experiences have the potential to save both lives and resources in future reconstruction operations.

## ESTABLISHING A LESSONS LEARNED PROJECT

In this section, we discuss key considerations for establishing a lessons learned project and identifying lessons worth learning. Specifically, we provide workshop insights on obtaining senior leader buy-in, determining lessons learned processes, selecting and prioritizing issues, asking the right questions, interviewing key officials, avoiding biased analysis, and framing lessons and recommendations to ensure they are both transferable to future operations and actionable by the intended audience.

---

### Obtaining Senior Leader Buy-In

Many workshop participants stressed the importance of early and consistent senior leader buy-in to the lessons learned process. In the initial phases of a lessons learned project, internal leadership support is important for motivating employees to dedicate time to being interviewed by the lessons learned team and openly share experiences, data, and documents. Often, this leadership support is needed to help overcome bureaucratic hurdles to sharing information. In order to foster candid information sharing, leaders must ensure employees understand it is safe and desirable for them to do so.

During the project, the lessons learned team should actively consider ways to maintain leaders' interest, whether through direct engagement with key leaders or other constituents of the organization.

A further benefit to obtaining and maintaining senior leader buy-in is the leaders' ability to help the lessons learned team understand the realm of the possible for the team's study-related recommendations. Having the senior leaders' perspective on the political and institutional environment will enable the lessons learned team to focus on areas that are most likely to yield positive changes.

---

### Determining Lessons Learned Processes

Workshop participants highlighted five important factors to consider when establishing lessons learned processes: resourcing, participation, transparency, unity, and history.

**Resourcing.** While acknowledging budgetary constraints, participants noted the importance of sufficient time and resources for a lessons learned project. As one workshop attendee stated, lessons need time to mature. This time includes not just research and analysis, but also time for the broader community to discuss and engage on the project. Without sufficient time and resources dedicated to the effort, teams will likely be unable

# LEARNING LESSONS

---

to cut to the heart of the lessons or develop recommendations that will lead to change within the organization.

**Participation.** In addition to being properly resourced, the project must be structured to include a diversity of relevant experiences. In particular, a lessons learned project team must engage with an operation's harshest critics, with views most antithetical to general organizational consensus. Incorporating critics helps identify the roots of their concerns to find lessons in the differences. Moreover, the failure to include critics creates a potential risk of their denouncement of a lessons learned project as biased or incomplete, thereby adding an obstacle to the implementation of the project's recommendations.

At the same time, when incorporating diverse points of view, it is important to ensure no one person has undue influence. Complex stabilization operations are, by definition, complex; no one person can effectively develop their lessons and recommendations.

**Transparency.** A commitment to openness and transparency is needed to garner trust and avoid surprises. Despite a team's best efforts to be inclusive, not everyone can be in the room while lessons are being developed. As such, transparency plays an important role in allowing stakeholders visibility into the process and the ability to communicate with the lessons learned team. Openness will also help to gain the trust of stakeholders who may be worried their concerns are not being considered. As a project moves forward, transparency can be achieved by sharing draft findings with stakeholders and inviting them to review and comment. This further encourages buy-in as stakeholders feel their voices are being heard. An additional benefit of early information sharing is the building of awareness and consensus, even before the final product is published. Policymakers may be more likely to support a lesson or recommendation if they feel they contributed to it.

**Unity.** A lessons learned project should be structured to encourage collaboration across the issues being explored by the team. If the analysis of different issues progresses too independently, each researcher may be able to say a lot about his subject area without understanding how it relates to other subject areas, or even to larger program goals. For example, this friction often arose in the context of Afghanistan, where best practices for counterterrorism operations were often at odds with best practices for governance. A holistic approach that links lessons from diverse issues is needed for whole-of-government operations such as complex stabilization missions. Connecting the streams together also helps keep the number of recommendations manageable for policymakers.

**History.** A lessons learned project team must strive to understand the historical context. As one workshop participant noted, there is nothing new in a complex stabilization operation. What seems to be unique has likely occurred before in other settings. As such, an effective lessons learned project should be mindful of lessons that have been identified from past operations.

## Selecting and Prioritizing Issues

Complex stabilization operations are characterized by the interaction of multiple efforts and forces, operating across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The large number of issues included in these operations requires a lessons learned team to prioritize certain issues as more worthy of analysis than others. The selection of these issues can be a very practical matter based on the audience. For example, the project could be tailored to the government agency that is most deeply invested in the outcome. In addition to ensuring the project findings will have an audience, leadership support promises access and cooperation during the research. For example, the 9/11 Commission's success was due, in part, to its identification of support from congressional leadership and focus on developing recommendations for legislative action.

Even with a strong mandate and high level of support, a lessons learned project will still have many potential issues from which to choose. Workshop participants provided four options for prioritization: using previously established operational metrics (e.g., metrics of success or failure), adhering to major lines of effort, focusing on well-known or highly publicized issues, or analyzing issues most likely to be transferable to future operations.

**Established Metrics.** The first option for selecting and prioritizing issues was the use of established metrics to indicate relative importance. A common metric used for this purpose is expenditures. Following the money will lead to lessons of interest to funders concerned about improving efficiency and preventing waste. In addition, money is often carefully tracked by the government, leaving a useful data trail for the lessons learned team to follow. However, there are important lessons to be learned in areas that large-scale funders do not pay attention to; following the money may lead to missed opportunities, including, for example, a lack of focus on small-budget programs that actually make a difference and could be scaled up.

Casualties, both deaths and injuries, were cited as another metric that could be used to prioritize issues worthy of further study. Tracking casualties could lead to identifying and learning lessons that could save lives. At the same time, however, the presence of casualties does not necessarily mean there are lessons to learn or improvements to make; complex stabilization operations come with some level of risk, so a goal of zero casualties may be unrealistic or ultimately counterproductive to the overall goals of the operation.

**Major Lines of Effort.** A second option for prioritizing issues was for the lessons learned team to follow the major lines of effort in an operation. These lines of effort are often explicitly laid out in strategies and plans articulated by agencies involved in the operation—and even if they are not, a lessons learned team can usually use their knowledge of the operation, as well as previous operations, to identify the main lines of effort. For example, across past complex stabilization operations, security, governance, rule of law, justice, economic development, and humanitarian assistance have all been major lines of efforts.

# LEARNING LESSONS

---

**Well-Known Issues.** A third option was to focus on issues that are already well-known and publicized. This is similar to focusing on the major lines of effort, but can be tailored to address public concerns or media narratives that received the greatest attention during an operation. A lessons learned project could become more relevant to policy-makers if it shed light on an ongoing public debate; however, it could also risk becoming politicized. Additionally, a project that only follows the public's gaze will likely overlook many significant but less glamorous issues, such as contracting and procurement regulations.

**Issues Transferable to Future Operations.** The fourth option raised by workshop participants was to focus on lessons that would be applicable to the future. The downside of this approach is that it is hard to predict what will be important down the road. One workshop participant offered Vietnam as an example, stating the United States did not seek to learn those lessons because we assumed we were not going to engage in an intervention like Vietnam again.

Given that ~~clarifying and generalizing~~ **clarifying and generalizing** has pros and cons, workshop participants suggested it would be prudent to blend multiple methods. A project could track casualties while thinking about future operations, or it could identify major lines of effort and track money within those lines. Triangulating with different approaches provides a more complete picture and better lessons. In all cases, participants stressed that the ultimate aim for a lessons learned team is to apply a laser-like focus to its work, as too large a scope will make the project unmanageable and likely to fail.

Finally, participants suggested that any lessons learned project focusing on a conflict should consider the perspective of the antagonist. For example, half of the 9/11 Commission's report is about the growth of al-Qaeda and the planning of its attacks. Understanding the foe is essential for learning lessons and changing behaviors, especially in response to an adaptive enemy who is also learning and changing.

---

## Asking the Right Questions to Identify Key Lessons

There are many angles from which to approach and gather key pieces of information. Workshop participants stated that the most obvious and straight-forward way is to ask what we did and whether it worked. For example, did we build a well in a specific village and did it provide water? While these questions can lead to important and necessary lessons, they may also miss deeper institutional dynamics that contributed to success or failure. Especially when we want to correct actions that had poor results, we need to address the roots of why actions were taken in the first place.

To move beyond surface level analysis, participants suggested that a lessons learned project needs to focus on moving beyond asking what happened to examining the assumptions, perceptions, and values underlying that action. For example, why did we decide to build a well in a specific village, was a well what we needed to build to help



# LEARNING LESSONS

---

that village, or was it built because that is what we as an institution were trained and funded to do? As the assumptions, perceptions, and values shape the actions, tracing an error back and correcting the underlying value or assumption improves the original action and reshapes future behavior.

It is important for the lessons learned team to consider how errors could arise from changes in operational context. It may be that an organization's assumptions worked well for its usual functions, but problems arose when it was tasked with a new operation where the usual assumptions did not apply. In such a case, the project team must make clear that assumptions, perceptions, and values were limited to certain contexts.

---

## Interviewing Key Officials

Workshop participants stated that one of the most valuable information sources for a lessons learned project is the people who were directly involved in the operation. While documents and datasets play an important role in lessons learned research and analysis, personal experience is crucial for understanding the context, actions, and effects that will inform the lessons and recommendations.

At the same time, capturing the human element comes with its own set of challenges. Workshop participants described ways in which people often hide failures and negative outcomes, even from themselves. Human perception is commonly biased in many ways. For example, personal recollections may be influenced by a fundamental attribution bias, which holds that individuals often overestimate how much they influence events, as opposed to external or situational factors. A similar bias is the self-serving bias, in which individuals overestimate their role in success and underestimate their role in failure. Ultimately, while individual perspectives are valuable for lessons learned projects, we need a cautious and measured examination of individual statements and recollections to account for some of these biases.

Participants noted that the lessons learned process faces two additional challenges in Washington. First, the information that people share will often be shaped by their political ideology, especially when it comes to developing policy guidance. In order to avoid having the lessons learned project itself become politicized, we need to seek and represent a diversity of opinions. Additionally, government agencies tend to be sensitive to failure. One participant noted, whereas businesses and private entrepreneurs are measured by their greatest successes, government officials are measured by their worst failures.

---

## Comparing and Generalizing

Lessons learned projects tend to focus on a specific operation; however, it is helpful to step back and take a larger view. Considering historical comparisons and

# LEARNING LESSONS

---

forward-looking generalizations can make the final product both more informed and more useful.

Workshop participants noted that comparative work significantly increases the knowledge and experience from which we can learn. For example, the 9/11 Commission drew from British, Israeli, French, Spanish, and German experiences.

Lessons also benefit from simulated comparisons where the lessons from one operation or event are applied to a different scenario during a tabletop exercise or simulation. This is important for validating lessons that are applicable in a variety of situations. Lessons often focus on which tools worked and which didn't, but only in a specific context. It is important to test the limits of where lessons apply and then to be explicit about those limits.

---

## Framing Lessons and Recommendations

Clarity is key in framing the lessons and creating actionable recommendations. Workshop participants advised that we make it obvious what the lesson is, when and where it applies, and how it fits into current knowledge and behavior. They stressed we should avoid lessons that do nothing to further our knowledge, such as “don't do that again” or “don't do stupid stuff.”

To develop more meaningful recommendations, *empathetic reconstruction* was recommended as a useful technique. In empathetic reconstruction, the team strives to look at decisions from the decision-maker's point of view, and to understand why and how the decision was made, and in what context. This method requires a high level of detail and an investment in time and learning.

Workshop participants warned that institutional and organizational change is always difficult, time-consuming, and risky. We must strive to provide compelling reasons for such change.

Lessons learned projects are often concerned about upsetting leadership, but this fear may be unfounded and is ultimately a risk worth taking. Speaking truth to power can be appreciated by leaders. They generally appreciate hearing that you looked at something from every angle and have advice on how to improve.

## APPLYING THE LESSONS

In many cases, identifying lessons is the easy step—actually putting those lessons and their related recommendations into practice is a much more difficult task. In fact, a true test of the enduring value of a lessons learned project is whether the lessons were acted upon and the recommendations implemented.

Workshop participants discussed three factors that could help support institutional change from lessons learned efforts: identifying the right audience and actors, identifying ways for an organization to institutionalize lessons, and tracking the progress of implementation.

---

### Identifying the Right Audience

Workshop participants discussed whether lessons and their related recommendations should be acted upon from the top down, starting with leadership, or from the bottom up, starting with the operational staff. The prevailing view was that it is important for both levels to incorporate the lessons and recommendations into their work, noting that each has different characteristics and challenges.

The top-down approach is a natural approach for implementation because leaders can advance lessons quickly throughout an institution by applying pressure and circumventing some bureaucratic hurdles. A leader is able to motivate learning, often by offering incentives for staff to learn the lessons and implement the recommendations quickly.

A challenge with the top-down approach is that leaders often have multiple issues competing for their attention, including ongoing operations that need immediate action. Some leaders only occupy their post for a year or two before moving on, making it difficult to implement institutional changes that must occur over a span of years. Even if they do have the time, leaders may not act upon the lessons for a variety of reasons. For example, participants provided several examples of lessons learned reports that were shelved by policymakers because they did not like the reports' conclusions.

To help ensure leaders' attention and action, participants suggested a few different strategies. First, lessons learned projects can actively advertise their work and play off a leader's natural desire to be part of important change. Second, a lessons learned project can emphasize how implementing the lessons will lead to fewer setbacks and greater success in the efforts leadership is already interested in. Third, packaging the lessons in different forms, such as focusing on "best practices" or highlighting successes instead of failures, can be more appealing to certain leaders. Fourth, visual presentations, including briefs, graphs, and charts, can help to quickly communicate the results in smaller, bite-sized formats.

# LEARNING LESSONS

---

Despite the importance of leader buy-in and the top-down approach, the bottom-up approach also has advantages. If an operational staff has the latitude to incorporate lessons into its daily work, then participants believed the bottom-up approach leads to quicker implementation than the top-down approach.

One concern with the bottom-up approach was whether implementation would last. Operational staffs, civilian or military, often serve relatively short tours before being assigned to a new location. When they go, they take with them the lessons they learned, along with their location-specific expertise.

One way to overcome this challenge of continuity is to package lessons and recommendations in a way that incoming staff can easily understand. In-person sharing is often a more compelling way to transfer information, but still requires the outgoing staff to present information in a way that is accessible to the incoming staff, who may have little experience to build upon.

Another strategy is to incorporate the lessons and recommendations into staff training and education, either in pre-deployment briefings or as part of a regular training schedule. Again, the lessons should be tailored to people who may not have much experience with the topics.

In addition to considering the best ways to implement lessons within an organization, workshop participants noted that it was also important to consider whether tailoring lessons toward a specific agency was sufficient in itself. Sometimes, lessons and recommendations required cross-organization engagement and implementation to ensure success.

---

## **Institutionalizing Lessons**

It is important to consider how organizations will learn and apply the lessons that have been identified. This includes considering how learning can be institutionalized so that future lessons can be more easily identified and adopted.

There are methods to help ensure continuous learning. Connecting the education and training functions of an organization to the lessons learned projects will help translate the work of those projects into the employees' training curricula. Creating permanent offices or positions with a clear mandate for identifying lessons and ensuring their dissemination creates a strong internal constituency that supports continual learning. Establishing processes for how lessons are disseminated, stored, and incorporated into the doctrine or policies of functional offices is especially useful for maintaining awareness and education, even as personnel rotate in and out of positions.

# LEARNING LESSONS

---

Finally, even if lessons are intended for one organization, they may be useful to other agencies. When possible, we should publicize our lessons to other interested organizations or encourage the sponsor agency to make the lessons public.

---

## Tracking Implementation

Workshop participants raised several questions about how to track the implementation of lessons and recommendations: What happens after the initial push for learning? Is there any way to maintain pressure for recommendations to be implemented? Participants noted that follow-on reports—conducted 5-10 years later—could be useful to gauge whether lessons were actually learned. For example, DOD's Operational Contract Support Functional Capability Integration Board reviews DOD's progress on implementing the recommendations from the Commission on Wartime Contracting reports. In another example, the Bipartisan Policy Center, with funding from the Annenberg Public Policy Center, sponsored a progress report on the 9/11 Commission's recommendations.

At the same, however, the ultimate effectiveness of these follow-on efforts is not clear. Such efforts may help track and encourage the implementation of recommendations, but they often face an uphill battle. Public and policymaker interest may have already moved on to other issues—and, if there wasn't enough pressure to implement a recommendation when it was first published, can a later follow-on effort make a difference? Several workshop participants raised questions about who or what organization would conduct the follow-up, which often occurs after the lessons learned team is disbanded. For DOD, the follow-up seems to be a combination of a strong institutional interest in ensuring the recommendations are implemented and a specific implementation and tracking system.

# LEARNING LESSONS

## Appendix A: Workshop Participants

Name		Affiliation
COL John	Agoglia, USA (ret.)	Trinity Planning & Investments
Dmitri	Alechkevitch	Peacekeeping, Peacekeeping Best Practices Section, United Nations
Gene	Aloise	SIGAR
Phil	Andrews	Center for Army Lessons Learned, U.S. Army
MG Raymond	Barrett, USA (ret.)	Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation
Greg	Bauer	SIGAR
Andy	Blum	USIP
Bernie	Carreau	Center for Complex Operations, National Defense University
Commander Jerome	Chevalier, French Navy	Innovation, Doctrine Coherence, and Lessons Learned Branch, NATO
Beth	Cole	Civilian Military Cooperation, USAID
Karen	Decker	Center for the Study of the Conduct of Diplomacy, U.S. State Department
Dan	French	Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute, U.S. Army
Larry	Garber	USAID
Dr. John	Gordon IV	RAND Corporation
Amb. John	Herbst	Atlantic Council
Dr. Ethan	Kapstein	USIP
Chris	Kojm	George Washington University
CAPT George	Landis, USN	Joint Staff, J7, U.S. Department of Defense
Frank	Lane	Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
Dr. Erin	Mahan	Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
COL John	Martin, USA (ret.)	U.S. Army War College, U.S. Army
Grant	McLeod	SIGAR
Bruce	Pennell	NATO Communications and Information Agency, NATO
Thomas	Perriello	U.S. State Department
COL Daniel	Pinnell, USA	Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute, U.S. Army
Valentin	Poponete	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, NATO
COL Paul	Reese, USA	Center for Army Lessons Learned, U.S. Army
COL Tim	Renshaw, USA	Joint Staff, J7, U.S. Department of Defense
Amb. Charles	Ries	RAND Corporation
Candace	Rondeaux	SIGAR
Dr. James	Shear	Wilson Center
Dr. Tom	Scherer	USIP
Dr. Myeong-Gu	Seo	University of Maryland
Kelly	Uribe	Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense
Caroline	Wadhams	U.S. State Department
John	Wallin	U.S. Air Force Lessons Learned, U.S. Air Force
Jim	Wasserstrom	SIGAR
Dr. Andrew	Wilder	USIP
Scott	Worden	SIGAR
Dr. Philip	Zelikow	University of Virginia



## **The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (P.L. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).**

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.

PRODUCT NO. SIGAR-17-15-LL

## WORKSHOP REPORT

# LEARNING LESSONS

CAPTURING AND INSTITUTIONALIZING LESSONS  
FROM COMPLEX STABILIZATION EFFORTS

MARCH 23, 2015 | WASHINGTON, D.C.



SIGAR  
Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction  
2530 Crystal Drive, Arlington, VA 22202  
[www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil)

#### FRAUD, WASTE, OR ABUSE MAY BE REPORTED TO SIGAR'S HOTLINE

By phone: Afghanistan  
Cell: 0700107300  
DSN: 318-237-3912 ext. 7303  
All voicemail is in Dari, Pashto, and English.

By phone: United States  
Toll-free: 866-329-8893  
DSN: 312-664-0378  
All voicemail is in English and answered during business hours.

United States Institute of Peace  
2301 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20037  
[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

USIP provides the analysis, training, and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability, and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding.

For media inquiries, contact the Office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202-429-4725.