

# Lessons learned – or are they?

An active Lessons Learned programme should result in tangible changes in attitudes, capabilities and behaviours. This is easily said, but much more challenging to implement and manage.



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In the summer of 2014 I participated in the naval exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC). I had the opportunity to write about the experience (*Seaways* Oct 2014 – ‘Learning from experience’), with thoughts on continuous improvement, lessons learned, and how they link to the Mariners’ Alerting and Reporting Scheme (MARS). In 2016, I participated in RIMPAC again; the world’s largest maritime exercise, with 26 nations, 50 warships, 200 aircraft, and over 25,000 personnel. Once again I was working in the Admiral’s staff in the lead role for lessons learned, and I can share experiences related to attitude, training, communication, and professional development.

## Getting buy-in

The first challenge is building a positive attitude regarding the need for the Lessons Learned programme. I can safely presume that the requirements for reports, reports, and more reports span militaries worldwide, and most seagoing and shore staff officers will grumble about the volume of reporting – and more particularly, that these reports never seem to have any effect. I assume that seagoing and shore officers in civilian maritime companies have similar experiences.

It is important that the process has ‘command buy-in’ because without a firm leadership commitment, the Lessons Learned process will fail. I have never met a Commanding Officer or Master that didn’t have a goal to improve the performance of the ship and its people. As Admiral Essenhigh noted ‘...senior people have a clear duty to take an ongoing, personal interest in mandating...the lessons learned process and then take personal responsibility to ensure that these actions are actually carried out.’ (*Seaways* May 2015 – ‘Lessons identified or lessons learned?’); it is a matter of clearly outlining expectations. Commitment to the programme is important, but in order to gain this, it is of vital importance to outline what the benefits are to the user. It must be clear that the Lessons Learned process is not just another set of reports to complete; feedback is an essential component to improve overall safety, efficiency and effectiveness, and importantly to introduce knowledge gained from experience. On examination, we are all doing this already. The introduction of a formal Lessons Learned programme simply formalises our attitude to this.

## Training process users

The RIMPAC Lessons Learned team faced challenges in training users both in the use of a software collection portal, and more significantly in how to submit quality observations. Just as in 2014, RIMPAC participants were spread across several military bases, were deployed in naval task forces, with different nations representing components of air, land, and sea elements. Every participant with access to the network could make an observation at any time.

There were two different approaches to submitting lessons learned. In the Maritime Operations Centre, individual sections submitted observations directly; in the Air Operations Centre, each section provided observations to a central officer for review and submission. Both approaches had merit. The Lessons Learned team had to develop an approach to meet the training expectations of dispersed groups, people working in shifts, people asked to make ‘raw’ observations directly to the portal, and people assigned to conduct initial review prior to inputting observations into the portal.

Many companies may be faced with similar issues, training people spread across different business units and ships at sea. It is important that training and support resources and networks be developed to ensure success. People will turn off quickly when given a task with no training on how to do it, but with support, initial scepticism can be turned to moderate engagement, and beyond! In the relatively short exercise, over 400 observations were received, and they continued to come in on the last day, even after ships had returned to port and were decompressing from an intensive at-sea programme, and while the equipment in the operations centres was being torn down for maintenance.

## Sharing the results

Another challenge going from RIMPAC 2014 to RIMPAC 2016 was communicating or sharing the previous lessons, including those which had completed a review process with changes, and those which were still under review. Unedited observations were placed in the dedicated RIMPAC Lessons Learned web space, but a surprising number of



Left to right, Lieutenant-Commander Angus Fedoruk (Royal Canadian Navy), Lieutenant-Commander Zoe Woodcock (Royal Australian Navy), and Lieutenant Marco Cruz (Armada Nacional de Colombia) discuss approaches to Lessons Learned training for RIMPAC exercise participants

## FURTHER READING

Learning from experience – *Seaways* October 2014 (Lt-Cdr Angus Fedoruk)  
Lessons identified or lessons learned? – *Seaways* May 2015 (Admiral Sir Nigel Essenhigh)  
CPD: Making a plan – *Seaways* July 2016 (Theresa Nelson)

## Feature: Lessons learned – or are they?

participants did not seem able to find them. As the team began to receive the observation ‘Previous lessons should be available’, we had to do some quick interviewing to find the root of the issue. The communication gap related back to training and awareness, a relatively simple set of causes to correct.

Companies may find the same issue. How do you ensure, not only that people submit observations, but that people can then find the observations that were submitted? Each organisation will find its own method, but be aware of the consequence of not effectively communicating where to find the information.

In 2014 I highlighted a great contributor to developing learning cultures: The Nautical Institute’s Mariners’ Alerting and Reporting Scheme (MARS). In this context, the key attribute of MARS that I want to highlight is its availability. MARS reports appear in the centre of each *Seaways*, easy to find, but more importantly, on the bottom of each page is an Internet address. This leads to an online database of all MARS submissions, searchable by date and keyword. The online database is accessible to anyone, you don’t have to be a Nautical Institute member to access it – what a tremendous contribution to the maritime community!

### Lessons learned and CPD

Last but not least, let’s discuss Continuing Professional Development (CPD). We often consider CPD in the context of completing a specific course or achieving a specific qualification. Theresa Nelson succinctly points out that CPD is about going beyond individual courses to develop the knowledge, skills and personal qualities to be a good leader and competent professional (*Seaways* July 2016 – CPD: Making a

plan). I strongly believe that a personal commitment to the Lessons Learned concept is complementary to this view of CPD. Going beyond the minimum is an objective of CPD, just as it is an objective of participating in Lessons Learned – as a receiver of the information and as a contributor to help other mariners to develop.

The implementation of a vigorous Lessons Learned process ensures accountability by establishing a feedback loop, minimising the repetition of errors. Ensure clear leadership commitment to transform attitudes, train and support users, set up clear methods to contribute and find information, and encourage all this as part of professionally developing as a mariner. The Nautical Institute’s assistance in CPD and the MARS are positive contributors to the overall Lessons Learned goal of adding value by creating a tangible change in attitude, capability and behaviour. 🌊

Lieutenant-Commander Angus Fedoruk AFNI has held Naval appointments as an instructor and director of training at the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) Officer Training Centre, as an advisor on Naval personnel policy and organisation, and senior leadership positions at sea. His current appointment is Senior Staff Officer Lessons Learned for the RCN’s Maritime Forces Pacific Headquarters. He is the Hon. Secretary for the British Columbia Branch, and a member of Council for The Nautical Institute.



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