



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PANDEMIC.

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**This whitepaper aims to re-introduce you to the concept of **lessons learned** to enable you to capture the impact of the pandemic and turn the memory into **valuable business improvements**.**

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### **About the Author:**

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# "WRITING SOMETHING DOWN DOESN'T GUARANTEE IT'S BEEN LEARNT FROM"

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## Introduction

As the author of this article, I will begin by seeking your indulgence. The title may be slightly misleading, this isn't intended to be a list of lessons that I think we can extract from the current situation. To pretend that I have some special insight into the challenges facing you and your business at the moment wouldn't be true or helpful. What I am trying to do is bring together some of the rather disparate experiences gathered over the course of my career and show how important it is to reflect on what is happening and to use that to grow stronger.

One of the many benefits of reading International Politics at Aberystwyth was the introduction to one of their former Professors, E H Carr. As an undergraduate I cannot pretend to have fully understood the wisdom of Carr but a couple of key thoughts have stayed with me over the last twenty five years or so. In answer to his self-posed question "What is history?" he answers:



*It is the continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past. <sup>1</sup>*

He further adds:



*The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past. <sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> - EH Carr, What is History (1964) Page 31

<sup>2</sup> - ibid Page 55





All very interesting I hear you say but what on earth does this have to do with the pandemic? It is my supposition that it is this process of dynamically learning from the past, using what we know today to revisit and reinterpret the past and better understand the present that is so important at this time. Later in my career, I spent some time working with the armed forces where they mostly called this process "Lessons Learned". To use the NATO definition:

*"The purpose of a Lessons Learned procedure is to learn efficiently from experience and to provide validated justifications for amending the existing way of doing things..."<sup>3</sup>*

It is my view, and one shared with some of my former colleagues, that using the term "Lessons Learned" is an entirely dangerous concept. Writing something down doesn't guarantee that it has been learnt from. It is my preference to call this process "Lessons Identified". It is more honest to the process and to the output, and the frailty it implies helps to ensure the output isn't glossed over.

A rather circuitous route to reach a point where we establish that recording experiences and issues is an important part of learning from them and improving the way we do things in the future. The military need to be good at this. Partly because the people in job roles are constantly changing and therefore the hard capture of experience is the only way to ensure it is there for the future. Moreover, to put a finer point on it, where people's lives are at stake on a daily basis, the quality of decision-making needs to be under constant review.



## MILTON'S THEORY: LESSONS LEARNED

In Nick Milton's book<sup>4</sup>, "The Lessons Learned Handbook", he argues that learning from experience is one of the most basic human activities, yet why does it provide so difficult when it comes to organisations? The answer to this is complex and has many aspects, not least that most human of traits of not wanting to admit that you got something wrong, with perhaps a small dose of individuals wanting to retain some knowledge to strengthen their positions.

I don't mean to appear to cast blame here, we all do it from time to time, and it is rarely intended to be malicious. The key to unlocking this is a robust process combined with an open minded leadership, committed to following through without blame. Milton offers statistics that show only around 1/3 of participants are happy with their Lessons Learned process with the vast majority offering lack of follow-through, senior management and culture as the major factors.<sup>5</sup>

So, we have established that learning from the past is crucial, that the art of the historian has been borrowed by the military and in turn is being adopted in parts of industry. That this should be the most sensible approach carries some logic, it is also backed by the law. It is easy to overlook that directors of companies are subject to statutory duties as laid out in the Companies Act 2006. The seven codified duties<sup>6</sup> are:

- They must know their powers and act within them.
- They must promote the success of the company for the benefit of members.
- They must show independent judgement.
- They must show a proper level of care, skill and diligence.
- They must not allow conflict to arise between their interests and the company's
- They must not take any benefit from a third party for doing or not doing something as a director.
- When the board is considering a matter in which a director has a personal interest he must declare the interest.

<sup>3</sup> - Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations AJP-3 - Page E-1

<sup>4</sup> - Nick Milton, The Lessons Learned Handbook (2010) Page 1

<sup>5</sup> - EH Carr, What is History (1964) Page 8

<sup>6</sup> - Griffiths & Griffiths, A Director's Guide to Duties (2015)





How does this help with Lessons Identified? If we simply focus on one element, so if we take they must promote the success of the company for the benefit of members, how does this help us? One of the major themes of corporate governance is corporate social responsibility; therefore by stating that the directors have to promote the success of the company this brings into play the other interest groups that have to be considered, such as<sup>7</sup>;

- the long term interests of the company;
- the employees;
- the suppliers;
- the customers;
- the environment;
- the community;
- the business reputation of the company; and
- the need to act fairly as between the shareholders.

A bit of a long winded list, but taking one or more of these reinforces the importance for the directors to understand risk. Consistently behaving in line with the law would be almost impossible without a system of risk management. The directors of a company need to understand what risks they face and what they should then do about it. One very basic way for the directors of a company to understand the risks the company faces is to run a robust and open Lessons Identified process.

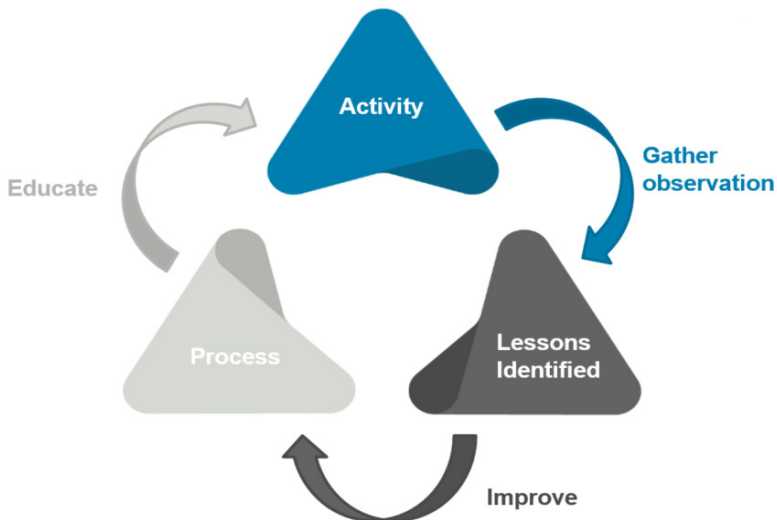


## WHAT PROCESS DO I FOLLOW?

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### Seven Codified Duties

We therefore accept that there is a logical and a legal reason for all companies to run a Lessons Identified process. A number of the publications I have referenced in this article offer detailed ways in which to approach and run a Lessons Identified process, I will offer brief thoughts as to how the reader could approach this. I do not propose that we should all follow a vastly complicated process that requires a great deal of management. Every aspect of business life seems to involve vastly complicated processes that need resources to run, this is entirely unnecessary for the Lessons Identified process, quite the opposite. The simpler the process, the better the understanding and the higher the level of engagement. I offer this process, which is a simplified version of that offered by Milton<sup>8</sup> :





## **"THE WORLD HAS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGES AND HAS CHANGED VERY QUICKLY"**

Every project or activity needs to include a gathering component, after completion, soon enough for memory to be fresh, but long enough for immediate pain to have subsided, to allow for proper reflection. This captures the raw lessons, which then should be reviewed to draw out the learning points, understand the root causes and what can be ultimately learned. Can these lessons then be generalised into a way that can inform future activity. It is important that the lessons identified are not simply recorded as the way not to do something.

The Lessons Identified should be able to be used to positively improve the way we do things going forwards. Why things didn't work out, what we did to fix them, what we could do to nip it in the bud next time. This level of review usually requires senior members of the team who understand why things are done the way they are now and the implications of changing that.

We then take that improvement and codify it into methodologies and process. Make sure that the right way of doing things is documented. This isn't the end of the process though. The lesson is identified and a fix is documented, but it isn't truly learned until the new methodology or process is taught. This closes the loop and the lesson has been learned.

Why is this important? In the last few weeks we have gone through the most dramatic change in the way we do business as individuals, as companies, as countries that we have gone through since the industrial revolution. The world has fundamentally changed and has changed very quickly. That change is not finished. We will not return to the way things were. The new way of working hasn't had time to evolve. This has been a big bang change and we need to rapidly capture what we have done, what has worked, what hasn't worked and start to understand what we need to do in order to improve things.

We have acted in haste to reduce the health risks for our people, quite rightly, but it is almost without question that we have imported significant business risk to our organisations. We need to review and learn before the less honest fraternity expose and capitalise on those risks.



**Think cyber.  
Think security.  
Think data.**

For more information on the services that IRM offers, please contact [hello@irmsecurity.com](mailto:hello@irmsecurity.com)

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