

Developing Lessons Learned

I believe that nothing is more important than our ability to effectively address our present than understanding the lessons learned from those who have come before. -- Charlie Gonzalez.

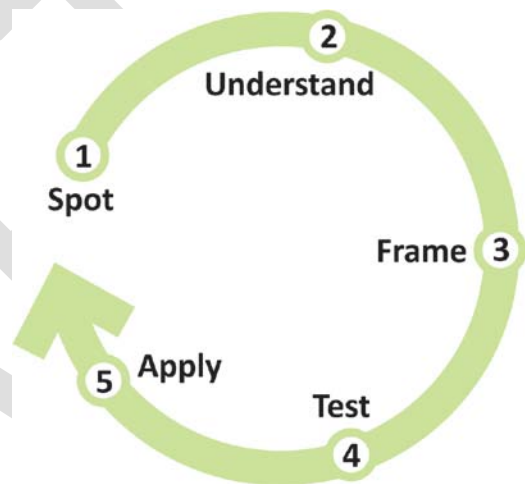
Social innovators trying to tackle complex social, economic and environmental issues commonly use a trial and error approach. They develop hunches about the nature of a problem and how it might be addressed, try things out, see what emerges and then adapt.

Learning is key to an adaptive approach to problem solving. Social innovators need to be able to spot an insight, understand it, adapt to it and figure out how to use it in the future.

The call for “lessons learned,” “intelligent failure,” “failing forward” has increased as quickly as the interest in social innovation and systems change efforts. However, the quality of these efforts is highly uneven. Michael Quinn Patton, one of the world’s evaluation experts, warns that “The ill-defined, trivial, and over-generalized ways in which the phrase ‘lessons learned’ has come to be used challenges evaluators to distinguish between casual or informal notions of lessons learned and what we call ‘high quality’ lessons learned” (Patton 1998).

The stakes of developing good lessons are high. Social innovators who, unable to develop robust lessons, rely instead on quick and loose processes for spotting and making sense of their successes and failures, will struggle

unnecessarily to make progress on the issues they are trying to address.



This document describes five steps that social innovators can use to spot, develop and use their learnings in a more systematic way.

These steps provide a framework, not a recipe. Social innovators, and their facilitators and evaluators, are free to employ a variety of techniques and practices in each step. It is also important to note that this framework represents only *one way* for social innovators to become more systematic in their learning processes. Other methods address the issue differently, some of them dramatically so (Cookingham 2013, CDC 2006, Davies 1997, 2009, Mauer 2002)

Definitions

Short Definition

A Lesson Learned is knowledge and experience—positive or negative—derived from actual incidents (U.S. Army's Center for Lessons Learned).

Longer Definition

A lesson learned is an observation based on the experience of a person, team, organization or collaborative which can be translated into relevant and useful knowledge. It can be based on a specific action, process or decision and may be triggered by positive or negative results. The lesson should indicate, where possible, (a) how it contributes to improving the chances for positive outcomes in the future, or (b) how it reduces or eliminates deficiencies. A lesson learned may become an emerging good practice when it shows proven results or benefits and has been determined to be sufficiently robust to be worthy of replication and scaling up (Mauer 2002).

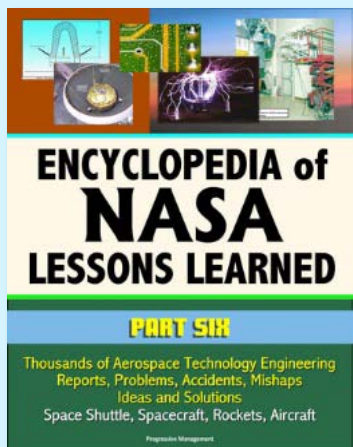
High Stakes of Lessons Learned

The dramatic loss of space shuttles and crews at NASA illustrate the terrible consequences of a culture that fails to acknowledge and learn from failure. The team that investigated the loss of the Challenger spacecraft, which exploded soon after take-off in 1986, reported that “a culture of complacency” had crept into NASA. Potential safety problems were routinely deemed insignificant if managers perceived them to impede tightly-controlled project timelines.



The team went on to say that the potential for another accident existed if NASA did

not more fully embrace the practices of a learning organization. In 2003, the spaceship Columbia exploded minutes before its re-entry into the earth's atmosphere, killing 13 people. The team investigating that disaster concluded that NASA had continued to ignore safety risks that threatened to disrupt work schedules. Moreover, managers discouraged dissenting views, a habit that created blind spots in assessing the risk of accidents (Westley, Zimmerman, Patton (2006).



Step 1: Spot

Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow. — William Pollard

The first step in developing a lesson learned is spotting possible learning moments when a group surfaces an important question or insight that may be (eventually) worthy of a lesson.

Social innovators generally experience learning moments spontaneously when they are in the “thick of it”, trying to make progress on a tough challenge. It might be a moment of great success or failure, an unexpected outcome, or the fatigue that settles in after repeated attempts to do something in a conventional way. It may even be an innocent comment or conversation.

Social innovators often respond to these insights in “real time,” quickly reflecting on what they might mean and adapting their strategy or operations accordingly.

Social innovators can also benefit from “slowing down” and employing structured methodologies that allow for a more systematic and collective process which will uncover all the insights that may make future efforts even more effective. Here are some examples.

After Action Review

A methodology developed in the military but increasingly used in complex change efforts that social innovators can employ immediately after an action or event to quickly and systematically explore what was implemented, achieved and worked well or did not work well.

Appreciative Inquiry

A set of questions and processes designed to understand what social innovators feel is successful in their efforts and what factors led to that success.

Cooperative Inquiry

A sophisticated, four-stage process of inquiry for diverse teams that combines reflection and action to develop shared, robust reflections and lessons.

Failure Fairs

A relaxed approach meant to encourage social innovators to admit to – and more fully describe – the various mistakes or failures they made in their various initiatives (EWB 2018).

Key Informant Interviews

A simple process of asking participants in a change initiative a series of questions about their experience with the effort, about insights they have had and questions that have arisen.

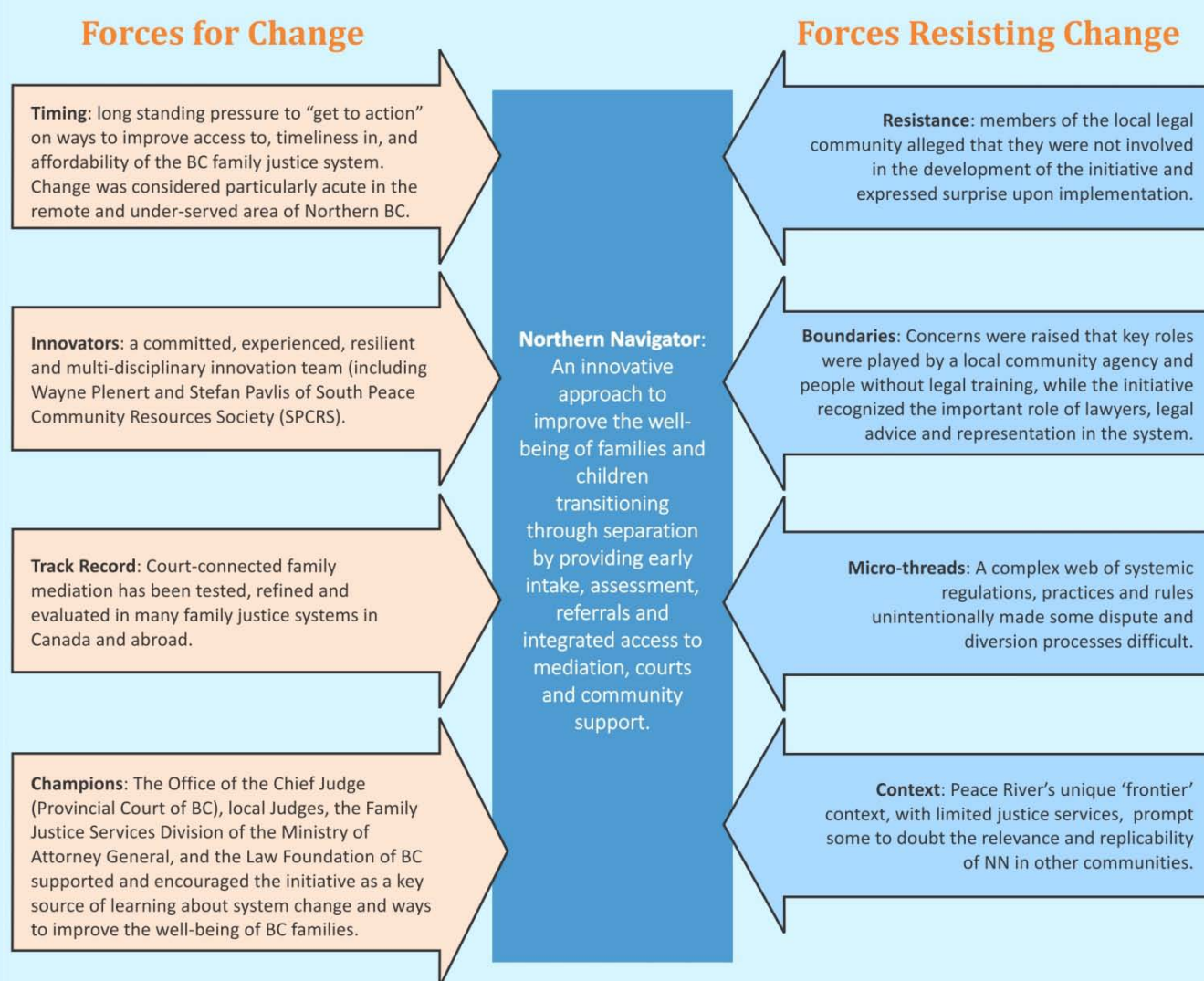
Reflection Journal

An individual practice whereby social innovators regularly document their actions, observations and questions and periodically review them in greater depth as part of a broader reflection on the implications and lessons for personal practice and change work.

These techniques (and the many others not mentioned) can be employed concurrently or at different times. For example, the facilitation team for the Energy Futures Lab (EFL 2018) – a social innovation lab designed to find ways to accelerate Alberta’s transition to a new, low carbon, energy system – employs After Action Reviews, reflection sessions, and Key Informant Interviews with Lab participants on a monthly, quarterly and annual basis.

Case Study: Northern Navigator

In the autumn of 2016, a dozen participants of the BC Family Justice Innovation Lab met with innovators and team members of the Northern Navigator initiative to reflect on the progress, results and learnings of the latter initiative. Further insights were noted in a report by Nicole Garton, "[Family Justice Reform in British Columbia](#)" (July 2017). A distillation of some of these reflections is captured below in a Force Field Analysis. The basis of Force Field Analysis is that situations are maintained by an equilibrium between forces that drive change and others that resist change, as shown in the diagram below. For change to occur, the forces driving change must be strengthened or those resisting change must be weakened. This tool provides social innovators with a simple way to plan or reflect on the factors enabling or acting as barriers to their new innovations.



Step 2: Understand

The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names. – Chinese Proverb

Spotting a possible learning moment – a success, failure or otherwise – is only the first step in the learning process. Social innovators need to make sense of the factors underlying the insight in order to develop a lesson that might be useful as they continue their process of trial and error.

Analysis of Learning

Like a tip of an iceberg, a learning moment – or even a pattern of such moments – is simply the most visible part of a potential learning. Social innovators must “dig deeper” to understand what is behind the success or failure before they can turn it into a lesson.

In some cases, the analysis of a possible learning is as simple as asking: Why did this event occur? Why is it significant? In other instances, more structured techniques, such as the Five Whys, Fishbone Diagrams, Problem Trees, Causal Loop Diagrams and Force Field Analysis, are useful. The Handbook for Participatory Action, Research and Planning (Chevalier & Buckles 2013) and Society for Organizational Learning (SOL 2018) have scores of such tools, for example.

Getting Agreement

Having a diverse group of people involved in making sense of a learning moment will improve the quality of the analysis. It will also increase the chances that people may understand a learning moment and the resulting lessons in very different and often insightful ways.

Take, for example, the difficulty in getting agreement on the lessons learned from the horrible massacre in Las Vegas in September 2017. A lone gunman killed 58 people and injured 546 others from the balcony of his hotel. Proponents of gun control point to the lesson that more

control is needed; advocates of the 2nd Amendment in the US Constitution (“the right to bear arms”) say that the lesson is that more people should have guns in order to better defend themselves.

Social innovators should do their best to get a general agreement amongst themselves about the understanding of a learning moment. But no agreement can be achieved, they must be prepared to live with different interpretations of those learnings – and debates about how to use them in practice. It may also create the conditions for diverse stakeholders to discover even deeper shared interests and values. In the case of the firearms debate, for example, an agreement among stakeholders on the fundamental need to preserve human life and safety could open up new opportunities.

Organizing Lessons

The number and variety of lessons is as boundless as the diverse innovations from which they emerge. Nevertheless, most lessons learned can be organized into three broad types. (See table, next page.) Social innovators should do their best to categorize the lessons. Each type may require a different adaptation in their work, ranging from a simple change in tactics and activities to a more radical restructuring of a group’s entire approach.

Technique: The Five Whys

The Five Whys are used to explore the cause and effect relationships underlying a problem, success or failure. This is done by repeating the question “Why” five times, with each answer forming the basis of the next question. The aim of the exercise is to complete a deep enough analysis to surface meaningful lessons for the future.

The Challenge:

Our client is refusing to pay for the leaflets we supplied them.

1 st Why?	The delivery was late, so the leaflets could not be used.
2 nd Why?	The job took longer than I expected.
3 rd Why?	We ran out of printer ink.
4 th Why?	The ink was all used on a large, last minute order.
5 th Why?	We did not have enough ink in stock, and could not order new supplies in time.

3 Types of Lessons Learned

An example of different types of lessons learned to emerge from the Collaborative Pro Bono Project (2018) in the BC Family Justice Innovation Lab. Each is rooted in a different sort of insight.

Type of Learning	Description	Example from A Collaborative Mediation Program
Single Loop	An insight into what works and what does not work in a group’s day-to-day activities. (“Are we doing things right?”)	Families need a lot more assistance understanding their various options for resolving family disputes in their orientation session.
Double Loop	An insight into the strengths and limitations of the group’s overall strategy and design. (“Are we doing the right things?”)	The sliding scale we have for family eligibility into the collaborative program is too high in Vancouver where people are “housing rich and income poor.”
Triple Loop	An insight into the nature of the challenge or problematic situation that social innovators are trying to change, which may lead to dramatic changes in strategy and activities. (“What are we learning about the challenge that we are trying to address?”)	Family members appear more willing to work together to resolve disputes if we address financial issues first.

Case Study: Northern Navigator

The following table shows how the Five Whys technique can be applied to explore one factor which caused some people to resist the Northern Navigator initiative.

The Issue Some members of the local legal community reported that they were not involved in the development of the experimental initiative. As a result, they were surprised by – or even resisted – its implementation.

	Insufficient Engagement	Discomfort with Experimental Processes	Different Values & Interests
The 1st Why	The distribution of information of Northern Navigator through normal communication channels did not engage the local legal community deeply enough.	Some members wanted more clarity about the design and/or implications of the innovation than was possible at this stage of the pilot. Therefore they may have dismissed it as “sloppy,” “incomplete,” or “not serious.”	Some members may actually have been concerned with the mediation model itself, not just the process of engagement.
2nd Why	Some members wanted to be more than just “aware” of the experiment: they wanted to be more directly involved in understanding and shaping it.	Many people in general – and many detail-oriented legal professionals in particular – value clear goals, plans and a high level of certainty about outcomes in new ventures. They experience real discomfort with the emergent nature of experimentation.	The current model of dispute resolution is an adversarial one in which lawyers play a central role. A mediation approach may threaten their authority, training and work practices, and business model.
3rd Why	People’s comfort with “change” increases when they feel that they understand the need for a change and can help influence how and when the change occurs.	While a discomfort with ambiguity is normal for most people, this trait is reinforced in the culture, processes and practices of the justice system. People and system processes (e.g., funding applications) privilege a “plan the work, work the plan” approach to management.	The adversarial approach emerged over centuries as part of the common law tradition. It is the basis for most of Canada’s family court system ... even if many in the system feel that the underlying paradigm needs to change in order to reduce conflict, rather than amplify it.
4th Why	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

Step 3: Framing Lessons

How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. Now we have some hope of making progress. – Niels Bohr

It is important to distil insights into lessons in a way that is accessible and that provides guidance to social innovators – and to those who support them – about how to put that lesson into action.

There are a variety of options for capturing and framing these lessons. The four most popular are described below. They range from relatively prescriptive if-then statements to more broadly framed “wicked questions” or design challenges.

If-Then Statements

If-then statements are very precise descriptions of what a social innovator should do in a specific situation. In its simplest form, an if-then statement has the following structure (Davies 2009):

If we [insert action], then [result] will happen.

For example, “If we impose user fees, it will create financial barriers for many lower-income families who want to participate in the program.”

The level of detail of if-then statements can vary widely. Those developed for very specific groups and contexts are often quite detailed, with elaborate descriptions of contexts, action and results (Cunningham 2013).

The strength of if-then statements is that they concisely clarify a lesson about the nature of the challenge in question and/or the effects of different types of interventions. The limitation of if-then statements is that they do not offer much guidance about how to translate the insights into action.

Practices

Practices are activities, exercises or steps that social innovators might be able to employ to apply a lesson.

For example, it was discovered how children were “re-traumatized” when repeatedly asked to describe family abuse (e.g., sexual, mental, physical) with front-line workers of various human service systems. Police, social workers, the legal profession and health workers developed a set of practices to reduce the likelihood that their essential duties would add to a child’s vulnerability. Some of these practices were the following:

- a shared interview protocol, so children would be asked to share their experience only once.
- “safe spaces” – rooms with small furniture, toys and color – in which children felt comfortable.
- interviews conducted by well-trained staff.
- working with the courts to ensure that their processes and regulations would require children to share their stories as few times as possible.

Practices are typically presented as a range of options from which to choose. Some may be described in extensive detail, and others ways may be simply interesting ideas or hunches about what might be useful. In all cases, they represent promising ways of doing things that may or may not prove effective eventually.

Principles

Principles are high-level statements that guide people's thinking and behaviour, without providing them specific details on how to behave or what to do in any given context (Patton 2017). A principle says, "This is critically important to your ability to achieve results – pay attention to it."

Take, for example, the principle of "Make small bets before big bets." The statement reflects hard-won lessons about the danger of building big initiatives that are "too big to fail" – even if they are not very innovative or effective. Essentially, so much time and effort have gone into develop the initiatives that people are reluctant to change course. The principle is meant to encourage social innovators to employ small-scale, low-risk and low-cost experiments to determine which ideas (if any) warrant larger experiments, investments or "roll outs."

Principles help social innovators to focus their attention on how to build on a lesson. Principles can be offered as stand-alone statements, or in combination with a set of if-then statements, practices and wicked questions

Wicked Questions/Design Challenge

Wicked questions or design challenges usually start with the phrase "How might we [insert question]?" (Power of Liberating Structures 2018). They are useful in situations where social innovations a) uncover a paradox (seemingly contradictory truths about a situation); b) encounter a dilemma (a difficult choice between two or more alternatives, especially alternatives which are equally undesirable); or c) simply have failed to clarify how something is to be accomplished.

Here is an example of where wicked questions are helpful. On one hand, Indigenous communities across Canada are very frustrated with the disproportionate number of Indigenous kids in state care, the poor outcomes for kids who experience state care, and a history of failed efforts at reform. They want action and real change "now."

On the other hand, Indigenous communities quite rightly wish to avoid hurriedly prepared, top-down, rigid "solutions" that do not involve them in meaningful ways, that ignore their preferred approach to addressing tough issues, and that apply one "cookie cutter" approach to diverse Indigenous communities. They desire "good process."

A wicked question that captures this tension is: How can we meaningfully engage Indigenous communities in a long-term process of developing, testing and scaling solutions that lead to accessible, culturally-appropriate policies and services, and reduce the number of kids in care, while still moving efficiently to action and outcomes?

The purpose of the wicked question is to frame the challenge in way that makes it coherent for social innovators, encourages them to employ creative thinking and action, and uncovers previously unexplored ways of addressing a tough issue.

It can take time and effort to develop a preliminary version of a lesson. Social innovators may disagree on the lessons itself or have different preferences for how it is framed. At some point, however, they have to take the essential next step: test the lesson with their peers. This is described in the next section.

Case Study: Northern Navigator

Here are four ways that social innovators involved in Northern Navigator might develop lessons learned statements for an insight concerning local resistance to the innovation.

The Insight

Insufficient Engagement

Some members of the local legal community reported that they were not involved in the development of the experimental initiative and expressed surprise – even resistance – upon its implementation.

Four Ways to Frame Lessons Learned

If-Then Statements

If you don't engage key stakeholders of a promising innovation early and/or well enough in the process, they are less likely to be supportive of it and may even resist the entire process.

Principles

Provide meaningful opportunities to engage the most influential stakeholders of a promising innovation in its development, testing and (if appropriate) scaling.

Practices

Target influential stakeholders of an innovation early in the process. Meet with them personally to discuss the case for the innovation, the general ideas behind it and hear their concerns. Create – and be clear about – the opportunities for them to co-design and/or provide feedback on early versions of an innovation and how that feedback will be used. Be transparent in listening to – and sharing – 360 feedback on what is / what is not working with the experiment as it unfolds.

Wicked Question/ Design Challenge

How can we provide opportunities for stakeholders to engage meaningfully in the evolution of an innovation, while carefully managing the limited time, energy and resources available?

Can a Lesson Be a Best Practice?

No. A best practice is a detailed description of a set of activities, steps and techniques that – if followed faithfully – should result in a (relatively) predictable outcome, regardless of the context in which that practice is applied.

Eventually, best practices might emerge from learning a lesson. But first, the principles and practices described as “best” must go through a lot of experimentation and evaluation to determine if, when properly implemented, they do indeed yield predictable results.

It is worth noting that despite the popularity of the concept of best practices, many people are skeptical about the use of the term and the quality of the best practices. Michael Quinn Patton, world renowned evaluator, argues that many things called “best practices” have not been rigorously tested, need to be adapted from context to context, and rarely produce predictable results even when followed. Why? Because there are rarely cookie-cutter solutions or recipes to complex challenges. He recommends instead that one focus on “best principles” that may be universal and/or “promising practices” that have shown results in context, but need to be adapted to be useful in other contexts (Patton 2001).



Step 4: Testing

The country needs and unless I mistake its temper the country demands bold persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all try something. -- Franklin D. Roosevelt

One of the biggest temptations experienced by social innovators is to treat their hard-won lessons as solid principles to inform future thinking and action. In reality, the strength of a lesson varies widely.

There are (at least) two criteria against which to test a lessons learned statement(s): the rigour underlying its analysis and how well the lesson is framed.

Rigour

Lessons spotted through individual experiences, that reflect only few people’s opinions and are not fully explored, are better described as “lessons learned hypotheses” or “informed hunches.” Lessons surfaced through multiple initiatives, developed through rigorous evaluation, and refined through interaction and debate with diverse stakeholders may be the basis for what can be termed “high-quality lessons learned.”

Degree of Rigour

The following continuum can assist social innovators to assess the strength of their lessons learned statements.

Lesson Hypothesis		High Quality Lesson
<i>A promising insight that we should consider and continue to test in the future.</i>	↔	<i>A strong lesson that should be used to guide further thinking and action.</i>
<i>Emerged out of single experience or event.</i>	↔	<i>Evident in multiple projects or cases.</i>
<i>Surfaced through spontaneous or semiformal discussion or reflection session.</i>	↔	<i>Produced through a formal evaluation that includes triangulation of mixed methods.</i>
<i>Developed by small group of like-minded people (e.g., beneficiaries, project team, external observers).</i>	↔	<i>Developed with a diverse group of beneficiaries, practitioners and external experts.</i>
<i>Not (yet) identified or explored in the broader field of practice and research.</i>	↔	<i>Broadly discussed and debated in the field.</i>
<i>Lower Rigour</i>		<i>Higher Rigour</i>

It is important to note that lessons of both types are useful and “actionable” for social innovators. Lesson hypotheses can act as prompts and guidelines that are useful in the development of an innovation and can be constantly monitored during its implementation. By contrast, high-quality lessons learned can be considered evidence-based principles that social innovators can confidently employ in all aspects of planning and implementation.

Framing

Rigour refers to the strength or the quality of data and analysis underlying a lesson learned statement. Framing refers to the extent to which the lesson is expressed so as to assist social innovators in their application of it.

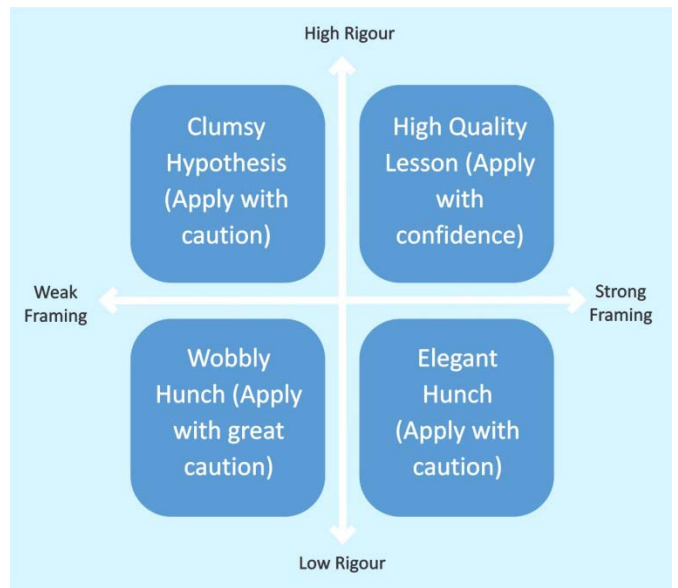
Testing the framing of a lesson can be done by simply by asking would-be adopters to answer three questions:

- To what extent is the lesson framed in a way that is **clear**?
- To what extent is the lesson framed in a way that is **meaningful** to your specific work?
- To what extent is the message is framed in a way that it offers some useful **direction** for you work.¹

There are two benefits of testing and adapting lessons learned statements. Firstly, it results in a higher quality lessons learned statement, and secondly, it increases the ownership of the lesson by the people it is meant to inform.

Assessing Strength

Testing a lessons learned statement against these two criteria can help social innovators determine what kind of lessons learning they have to work with. The matrix below offers a simple way to determine which lessons are stronger than others, and the implications of that determination for next steps.



¹ These questions are inspired by the work done on Principles-Focused Evaluation by Michael Quinn Patton (2017).

A High Quality Lessons Learned Case Study: Northern Navigator

One of the high-quality lessons (re) learned in the Northern Navigator project is that people in “systems” (for example, family justice, education or health) are resistant to change. This truth was dramatically captured in a quote by the political philosopher, Niccolo Machiavelli, more than 500 years ago.

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries ... and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it. — Niccolo Machiavelli

This insight has emerged repeatedly in evaluation upon evaluation over time, and is a central concern of participants in most change management, systems reform, and social innovation efforts.

Machiavelli arguably can claim credit for laying the seeds of modern field of change management, which has spawned countless different models, methodologies and techniques. One of the most famous approaches is the one devised by John Kotter (2012). He argues that organizational leaders can improve their chances of successful change by applying eight key principles, organized as steps with a variety of possible practices:

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create a guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision
5. Empower employees in broad-based action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Consolidate gains and produce more change
8. Anchor new approaches in culture

Kotter’s model is the most coherent and widely used in the field. Still, its principles, steps and practices should be considered a work in progress, as yet unable to guarantee success. Some of the more popular critiques of his approach are as follows: (a) it is too linear for what is unavoidably a messy process; (b) it is focused on a one-off event, rather than the continuous change required to keep up to an endlessly changing environment; (c) it is too “top down” to truly engage employees; and (d) it is naïve about the power of “vested interests” and their role in resisting change (O’Keefe 2011). While many other change models have emerged to address these limitations, those employing Kotter’s approach have experienced enough success that it should be at least considered a “promising practice” – no small contribution in the very difficult enterprise of social innovation.

Step 5: Apply

There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience. -- Archibald MacLeish

There are countless documents in which an innovator lays out lessons learned in significant detail, but the lessons are not reflected in a social innovator's strategies, policies or practices. These lessons have not been learned.

It is often difficult for people to apply lessons learned, regardless of how hard-won these lessons are. Extensive work on psychology and group dynamics show that even well-intentioned people are often resistant to embracing new ideas or ways of doing things (Donahue and Tuohy 2006). This is particularly true if the "learning":

- is a product of a mistake or a failure.
- challenges people's long-held values and beliefs.
- requires an organization to give up a cherished or self-serving practice.
- requires a great deal of effort to act on.

It is impossible to guarantee that social innovators will overcome these universal human frailties and "learn" a lesson. Still, there are things we can do to improve the probabilities they will do so. Four popular ones are (OMG Center 2014):

- to formally integrate lessons into strategies, plans or operational documents (e.g., toolkits).
- to work with evaluation stakeholders to understand their major decision points, or project-related milestones, to time data collection and deliverables.
- to provide lessons learned documents in a way that promotes learning and use (e.g., a series of reflection

questions, bulleted observations in a memo format, a conversation, or a graphic).

- to hold periodic "expectation setting" conversations to ensure that lessons learned documents answer stakeholder evaluation questions as they evolve.

Monitoring the application of lessons learned can also be part of a group's larger evaluation strategy. This includes periodic interviews with key stakeholders to explore the following questions:

- To what extent do you find these lessons (still) meaningful?
- Where have they been most strongly or consistently applied? Why? Where have they been most weakly or inconsistently applied? Why?
- To what extent has applying the lessons – or not applying them – influenced the results of our work?
- How can the lessons be reframed – or our work adjusted – to improve the probabilities that the lessons will be useful?

Social innovators can use the answers to these questions – like all good evaluation feedback – to inform the ongoing adaptation of their lessons and how they implement them.

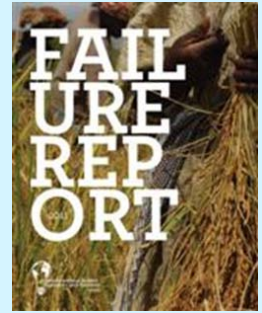
Failure Report

It is very difficult for people not directly involved in a learning moment to understand what was learned, feel some ownership of it, and eventually act on it, simply because they do not have a first-hand experience of – or emotional connection to – the event.

The Failure Report, developed by Engineers without Borders (EWB), is an excellent example of a lessons learned document that can dramatically improve the likelihood that their lessons will be broadly disseminated and picked up:

EWB believes that success in development is not possible without taking risks and innovating – which inevitably means failing sometimes. We also believe that it's important to publicly celebrate these failures, which allows us to share the lessons more broadly and create a culture that encourages creativity and calculated risk taking. This is a culture we value within EWB, and also try to work with our partners in Africa to create in their organizations.

Each annual report contains a full case study, written by an engineer with a story to tell, that provides the context of their work, what they tried to do, what did not work out, their best assessment of why it did not work, and – most importantly – what lesson they learned from the experience. (Engineers without Borders)



Resources

There are countless resources on how teams and organizations can learn more systematically. The following five sources provide a variety of techniques and methodologies that any social innovator will find useful.



Better Evaluation. The best website on evaluation resources in the English-speaking world. Simply punch in “Lessons Learned” into the website’s search engine and you will be rewarded with multiple resources on the topic.

<http://www.betterevaluation.org/>



Fail Forward. A practical set of ideas and techniques to encourage people to spot, understand and respond to “failure” in their efforts to tackle tough challenges. <https://failforward.org/>

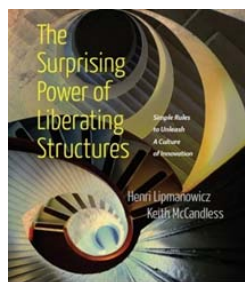


HUMAN SYSTEMS
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

Human Systems Dynamics. A set of techniques embedded in a model of adaptive leadership that emphasizes a simple pattern of questions for social innovators tackling issues in real time: What happened? So what did we learn? Now what are we doing to do? <http://www.hsdinstitute.org/>



The Society for Organizational Learning. The website of the people who created the “learning organization” revolution, and authored *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organizations*, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building Learning Organizations*, and *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations*. <https://www.solonline.org/>



The Power of Liberating Structures. While not specifically devoted to learning, the website contains a variety of techniques that diverse groups can use to support learning activities, such as appreciative interviews, wicked questions and triad consulting. <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

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This **Aid 4 Action** was prepared by Here to There Consulting based on contributions from two change initiatives in British Columbia (Canada), in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, who have received Innoweave grants to evaluate their social innovation efforts in the area of family service and justice: the BC Family Justice Innovation Lab and Access to Justice BC.



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