

Will We Learn from Experience?

How many of us have worked in groups that failed to learn from experience? We have hundreds of experiences. But when we fail to learn from an experience, it slowly fades away until it becomes a distant memory. And then someone else must learn the lesson.

My friend Alex was a team leader in an NGO that offered help to farmers and shepherds in the area. One of Alex's responsibilities was acquiring and delivering veterinary supplies.

When Alex started this work, he didn't really know what he was doing. As often happens, some donor had become aware of a batch of vaccines and wondered if Alex could use them. They were set to expire in 30 days, so this was a case of "use it or lose it... but if you do well, there is more where this came from."

Alex scrambled. There was a village outside of town that his team had been working with. The sheep were unhealthy and the vaccine would be a blessing. It seemed like a match made in heaven. The donor pulled together the money to transport the medicine to the border and the NGO raised funds to distribute them in the village.

The truck arrived at the border, 25 days before the medicine was set to expire. And there it sat. First, it was missing paperwork. Then the wrong government stamp had been applied. Then the Department of Agriculture had to be consulted... on both sides of the border. Then there was a question about whether this was actually medicine or might be illicit drugs. On and on: 20 days, 10 days, 5 days. Miraculously, the day after the drugs expired - the day after they became worthless - the truck was released to cross the border.

You can imagine the frustration! The feelings of defeat. Angry donors. And the villagers lost confidence in Alex.

They had had such good intentions. While they didn't know exactly what they were doing, they had faith and hope that it would work out. Alex remembered hearing a veteran worker tell him, "Hope is not a plan." Do your planning. And when things don't work out well, you can look back at the plan to adjust for the next time.

Alex pulled the team together, along with some other workers and even some nationals, to reflect. Comparing what they had expected to happen with what did happen, the most obvious problem was that they lacked a reliable border agent, someone well-connected who could ease shipments along. Thinking about the donor's anger, they also realized they needed better communication "upstream" - back to the people supplying medicines and money: They had focused too much on the villagers. Alex stopped at these two fixes: "Solve these and let's see what happens next time."

Fortunately, there was a next time. The donor came through with one more shipment. A friend's cousin's uncle got the medicines through customs in under a week. The villagers were happy with the results and invited Alex's NGO to work more with them.

A side benefit was that the friend's cousin's uncle proved reliable for many other border issues.

That was a year ago. Alex and I were talking about this over coffee. By now, the medicines came across more or less easily. Impressed by the team's ability to reflect on the incident and see real improvement, I asked what else they had learned. "When was the last time you all reflected on your veterinary distribution work?"

He looked at me sheepishly and said, "Oh, we haven't done reflection exercise. I guess we should because it was so helpful, but..."

Having grown one flower successfully, Alex was busy planting his field of cut flowers. He had lost a year's worth of lessons that could have benefited all sorts of areas of his NGO.

Why is it hard to learn from what we do?

Alex's experience is rare but unsurprising. Most teams do not ever stop to reflect on what has happened. If they do, it just done informally. They rarely track progress. They come up with too many ideas and nothing gets done.

Alex was the rare team that stopped to reflect in a formal way. He used the approach I call an "After Action Review" - the practice of learning while doing. He used the four questions of the After Action Review (AAR):

- What did we expect to happen?
- What did happen? What went well? What went less well?
- What do we want to keep doing?
- What are the top 2-3 things we want to change the next time?
- There is a fifth question, "Who else needs to know about this?" which Alex didn't ask.

What is sad is that Alex treated this AAR as a one-time exercise. He didn't incorporate it into the routine of the team. But this is even true of big companies. General Motors is famous for spending months to identify one improvement that makes things 20% better and then going around the country, PowerPoint in hand, to show it off. Toyota, on the other hand, strives to make a 1% improvement each week, letting the bigger improvements arise when they do. At the end of the year, they have achieved three times the improvement of GM!

The difference is *discipline*: doing it in the first place and then keeping at it. When teams have a routine expectation that they will be stopping to reflect on the experience they have just had, to talk about what to keep doing and what to improve, and then to start working again, they learn to pay more attention to what is happening. Improvement becomes more routine.

What gets in the way? I have heard all of these:

- I am busy and need to get on to the next task.
- I don't want feelings to be hurt.
- It is not safe to reveal mistakes. The leader is insecure. He tends to blame people. When something goes wrong, he focuses on "Who did this" and not on "How did our processes allow this to happen?"
- We are doing well enough. There really isn't any need to have to improve.

These comments come from teams that are satisfied with cut flowers: teams that are willing to have to re-learn lessons... and to condemn other teams to learning those same lessons.

Hoping things will turn out better next time rarely ever works out. More often, it is like the man who has had 20 years experience: the same experience every year for 20 years. Learning from my experience – and from the experience of others – is much healthier and fruitful.

Reflection Questions

Here are questions if using this case study in a workshop.

- What is the major point of this case study?
- In the work we do, what are primary contributors to mistakes, inefficiencies, road blocks, miscommunication, and rework
- Thinking about these, what are the potential benefits for AAR?