

# POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIORS AS THE KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR LESSONS LEARNED SYSTEMS: THE CASE OF MILITARY ORGANIZATIONS

*Andrzej Lis*

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland,  
e-mail: andrzejlis@econ.umk.pl

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to study the role positive organizational behaviors play in Lessons Learned systems in military organizations. The paper is based on the outcomes of the analysis of military documentation, the observation method and the opinions of the Lesson Learned personnel of the organizations under the study. The case study provides the examples identified in: NATO, the U.S. Army and the Polish Armed Forces. In a natural way, the attention is focused on the organizations recognized as the key Lessons Learned players in their respective armies/alliance: the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), the U.S. Centre for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and the Polish Armed Forces Doctrine and Training Centre (PAF DTC). The scope of the analysis includes leadership and the stakeholders' involvement in capturing observations, sharing information and learning from others.

**Keywords:** organizational learning, Lessons Learned, positive organizational behaviors, leadership, information sharing, stakeholder involvement, positive mindset, military organizations

**Paper type:** case study

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## **1. Introduction**

The latest research projects conducted in the Department of General Management of the Nicolaus Copernicus University have focused on the issues of Knowledge Management (Stankiewicz, 2006) and Positive Organizational Scholarship (Stankiewicz, 2010). In both cases, "soft" elements such as organizational culture, climate and behaviors have been in the center of the researchers' attention. Within the first project, Kalińska (2006: 263-268) identified the following elements of the organizational culture and climate having an impact on Knowledge Management processes: (1) team orientation and the ability to work in teams; (2) climate of mutual trust; (3) climate supporting creativity and experimentation; (4) climate fostering people to admit to their lack of knowledge and accepting the risk of

failures; (5) orientation to customers; (6) loyalty to a company; (7) informal groups in an organization; and (8) tolerance for uncertainty. Glińska-Neweś (2006: 288-296) enumerated organizational behaviors considered to be particularly important for managing knowledge. The catalogue included: (1) leadership, (2) team work; (3) internal communication; and (4) attitude to changes and innovation. They were discussed in details in her consecutive book on cultural determinants of Knowledge Management (cf. Glińska-Neweś, 2007: 85-122). The second project was entirely devoted to the Positive Organizational Scholarship approach which emerged in the United States a decade ago (cf. Cameron et al., 2003) and has expanded throughout the world. The detailed studies on positive organizational potential (Glińska-Neweś, 2010a: 37-52; Chodorek, 2010a: 53-74; Chodorek, 2010b: 85-96), positive organizational culture (Glińska-Neweś, 2010b: 75-105), positive organizational climate (Kalińska, 2010: 107-140), positive employees' behaviors (Józefowicz, 2010a: 141-158; Józefowicz, 2010b: 75-84) and relations among the aforementioned elements (Haffer, 2010: 159-213) contributed to creating the model of managing the intangible resources for the organizational development.

Nevertheless, within both of the projects the emphasis was given exclusively to for-profit companies while the other types of organizations did not receive enough attention. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to contribute to filling this gap and to study the role positive organizational behaviors play in Lessons Learned systems in military organizations. The aforementioned aim has determined the following operational objectives: (1) to outline the Lessons Learned (LL) solutions in selected military organizations; (2) to identify the key success factors for Lessons Learned capabilities; (3) to discuss in details the issues of leadership and stakeholder involvement in experiential learning processes within studied organizations; (4) to develop the concept of further research in this area.

The case study is based on the outcomes of the analysis of military documentation, the observation method and the opinions of the Lesson Learned personnel from the organizations under the study. The documentation analysis has encompassed: doctrines, directives, manuals and handbooks. Observations has been captured during national and international events and activities by the author who has been the member of the Lessons Learned community in the Polish Armed Forces since December 2011. Moreover, the voice of military Lessons Learned experts and practitioners has been incorporated in the study. The analysis has included their opinions and insights expressed publicly in documents, addressed officially to the training audience and shared in interviews. The case study provides the examples identified in: NATO, the U.S. Army and the Polish Armed Forces. In a natural way, the attention is focused on the organizations recognized as the key Lessons Learned players in their respective armies/alliance: the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), the U.S. Centre for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and the Polish Armed Forces Doctrine and Training Centre (PAF DTC).

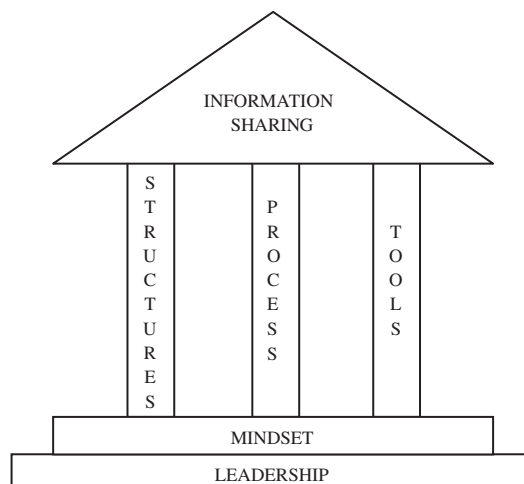
The paper is structured into three parts. First of all, the emphasis is focused on the assumptions, the model and the key success factors for military Lessons Learned capabilities. Secondly, the role of leadership is explored. Thirdly, the stakeholders' involvement in capturing observations, sharing information and learning from others is discussed. Finally, within conclusions, the objectives and the research problems for further exploration are identified.

## 2. Military Lessons Learned capabilities

As observed by Jabłoński and Lis (2012b), “learning from prior wars, campaigns and battles has always been the force driving the development of military strategy, operational art and tactics, and determining the technological advancement of armaments and military equipment”. Therefore, military organizations have valued experiential learning and they have developed Lessons Learned capabilities in order to capture observations, insights and lessons, and to make use of them. In accordance with the NATO approach, “[t]he term Lessons Learned is broadly used to describe people, things and activities related to the act of learning from experience to achieve improvements. The idea of Lessons Learned in an organization is that through a formal approach to learning, individuals and the organization can reduce the risk of repeating mistakes and increase the chance that successes are repeated. In the military context, this means reduced operational risk, increased cost efficiency, and improved operational effectiveness” (NATO LL Handbook, 2011: 1). The aforementioned explanation of the Lessons Learned nature highlights its role as a bridge linking experiential learning (capturing observations and analyzing them) with remedial actions aimed at implementing improvements. In order achieve these aims, military organizations need to develop their Lessons Learned capabilities including: structures, processes and tools (cf. Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The NATO Lessons Learned capability

Source: Bi-SC Directive 80-6 Lessons Learned, 06 July 2011 as cited in: The NATO Lessons Learned Handbook, Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, Second edition, September 2011, p. 9.



As presented above, structures, process and tools constitute the pillars of “the NATO Lessons Learned house”. Structures include Lessons Learned staff officers and analysts both decentralized and embedded into the headquarters and forces as well as concentrated in highly specialized organizations providing permanent analysis capabilities such as: the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), the U.S. Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) or the Polish Armed Forces Doctrine and Training Centre (PAF DTC). Generic military Lessons Learned processes encompass the following stages: the identification of observations, analyses, the implementation of improvements and the dissemination of Lessons Learned. The military organizations under the study apply a wide range of Lessons Learned tools supporting their organizational learning and sharing information. The thorough analysis of the Lessons Learned structures, processes and tools in NATO, the U.S. Army and the Polish Armed Forces is provided by Jabłoński and Lis (2012b).

The NATO Bi-Strategic Command Lessons Learned Directive identifies the following Key Success Factors (KSFs) for a Lessons Learned capability: the engagement of leaders, positive mindset, willingness to share information and stakeholder involvement (Bi-SCD 80-6, 2011, as quoted in NATO LL Handbook, 2011: 10). As highlighted by one of the interviewed experts, the classification derives from the finding of the JALLC analyses on the Lessons Learned process and sharing in NATO and the ISAF operation in Afghanistan. The KSFs identified in these aforementioned projects included: leadership, stakeholder responsibility and information assurance.

Discussing the Lessons Learned processes in the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC), Sewell (2009: 37) highlights three core guiding principles: cooperation, communication and coordination. Cooperation means “the willingness of people or organizations to work or act together for a common purpose or benefit”. Communication is “the art or technique of using words effectively to share thoughts, information or ideas”. Coordination denotes “the skilful and effective interaction of parts into an integrated and harmonious operation”. The aim of all the three principles is to provide prerequisite conditions, and to foster procedures and organizational behaviors resulting in effective experiential learning and sharing Lessons Learned. The impact of the aforementioned principles in remedial actions phase is officially recognized in the NATO LL Handbook (2011: 33).

Similarly, positive organizational behaviors are three of four determinants of the Lessons Learned system’s effectiveness enumerated in the Polish Armed Forces (PAF) LL manual. The triplet includes: „active involvement of commanders at all levels of the PAF; soldiers’ and civilian employees’ creative and innovative thinking aimed at improving the PAF operations and capabilities; [and the] willingness to share lessons learned and to exchange information at all levels of the PAF (Instrukcja SWD, 2011: 5-6, translation A.L.)”.

The comparative analysis of the military approach and the studies on determinants of knowledge management in civilian organizations (cf. Glińska-Neweś, 2007: 85-122; Kalińska, 2006: 263-268) confirms the significant role organizational culture and organizational behaviors play in organizational learning. The emphasis on positive organizational behaviors follows the most up-to-date trends in the theory and practice of management such as Positive Organizational Scholarship which emerged as early as a decade ago (cf. Cameron et al., 2003; Stankiewicz, 2010). Therefore, the aim of the following sections is to explore the military approach to developing and strengthening positive organizational behaviors crucial for Lessons Learned capabilities. The analysis will focus on Lessons Learned key success factors identified in NATO and the PAF. The scope of the analysis will include leadership and stakeholders' involvement in capturing observations, sharing information and learning from others.

### **3. The role of leadership in the Lessons Learned capability**

Both researchers and practitioners highlight the significance of leadership in contemporary organizations. In the armed forces, leadership has always been considered as one of the key characteristics of a good commander. Therefore, leadership is included into the NATO DOTMPLF-I categorization used to analyze military capabilities. As the Lessons Learned process combines experiential learning and continuous improvements, the will and decisions of military executives are necessary to put lessons identified and recommendations into practice. According to Hallett (2010: 23-24), the active engagement of the command leadership in the Lessons Learned activities is necessary to ensure rare resources including time and attention. Moreover, strong leadership supporting Lessons Learned initiatives is indispensable in order to “foster an institutional culture that not only accepts the need for the organizational self-examination that underpins a successful Lessons Learned program, but embraces it”. As stated in the Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations, learning from experience “requires lessons to [...] be brought to the attention of the appropriate authority able and responsible for dealing with them. It also requires the chain of command to have a clear understanding of how to prioritize lessons and how to staff them” (AJP-3(B), 2011: 4.19). Hallett et al. (2009: 43) point out three elements of leadership's role in a Lessons Learned capability: (1) guidance; (2) engagement; and (3) promotion.

Commanders' guidance is necessary to establish the priorities of Lessons Learned business, to allocate resources necessary for analysis and remedial actions and to involve external stakeholders into projects beyond the capacities of the organization (Hallett et al., 2009: 43). According to the Hallett's further studies (2010: 24) the commanders' guidance is expressed through: (1) providing documents such as command directives or Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs)

which explain Lessons Learned policies and responsibilities in the specific context of the unit or headquarters; (2) prioritizing attention and other rare resources throughout the Lessons Learned process; and (3) managing the remedial actions phase. Depending on the context and the level of command, the form of the commander's guidance may vary from informal tasking to very formal textual regulation. The Prioritized Analyses Requirement Lists used in the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre and the Polish Armed Forces Lessons Learned system represent a prominent example of official documents expressing the commanders' will and guidance. The Lessons Learned process is time-, effort- and resources-consuming activity. Therefore the commanders' engagement and support are indispensable for its success. Only when commanders give top priority and personally engage in the Lessons Learned business, the process can get the right momentum. Commanders' engagement is particularly crucial in the remedial actions phase. That is the commanders' responsibility to endorse the action plan, to commit resources, and to nominate and task an action body. The U.S. Army Lessons Learned Handbook enumerates senior leader involvement at the top of requirements for the issue-resolution process which corresponds to the remedial action phase in the NATO and Polish models of the Lessons Learned process. As highlighted in the aforementioned document: "Senior leader involvement or executive-level participation in the issues-resolution process is the key to success. Without senior-level leadership involvement with the authority to task agencies to work issues and reallocate resources, the process fails. For example, successful issues-resolution steps in the U.S. Army required involvement at the three-star general officer level. This commander had the ability to task his subordinate two-star commanders with responsibility for their respective service branches and combat development processes to drive changes to doctrine, training, education or materiel" (CALL Handbook, 2011: 33-34).

Commanders' role to promote a Lessons Learned capability is expressed by motivating their subordinates and encouraging the exchange of Lesson Learned products with other organizations. Establishing incentives for personnel contributing to a Lessons Learned process by capturing observations, identifying lessons and sharing their insights is extremely important to overcome the human, psychological resistance to externalize own problems and deficiencies. The promotion of sharing lessons with other organizations in the chain of command or with allied partners is crucial to exploit the effect of synergy and to avoid making the same mistakes across organizations (Hallet et al., 2009: 43). As later highlighted by Hallet (2010: 25), "Lessons Identified and Lessons Learned sharing increases organizational Information and Knowledge Management (IKM) productivity by making knowledge available at very low cost in time, money and attention. This sharing provides the surplus value of the Lessons Learned system (...)". Promoting the Lessons Learned system as the tool of experiential learning and permanent

improvement, and developing positive organizational culture and organizational climate are the other tasks commanders are to fulfill in order to succeed in Lessons Learned initiatives. Hallet (2010: 26) suggests to achieve this aim in two steps. Overcoming resistance to admitting mistakes and implementing changes is the first challenge. Developing the positive incentive system motivating human behaviors favorable for learning, sharing knowledge and introducing changes is the second one. The shift from counteracting disincentives to encouraging positive aspects of experiential learning resembles the assumptions of the two-factor theory of motivation developed by Herzberg (cf. Griffin, 2008: 440-441).

Strong leadership, providing guidance and prioritization, personally engaging in Lessons Learned processes and promoting experiential learning among subordinates, is one of the prerequisites of the efficient Lessons Learned capability. As highlighted in the NATO LL Handbook (2011: 4), “true organizational learning only takes place when driven by leaders”. The aforementioned statement is a short but very precise conclusion of the role of military commanders in the Lessons Learned processes.

#### **4. The role of stakeholder involvement in the Lessons Learned capability**

As found within the military organizations under the study, the involvement of all personnel is the prerequisite for the success of the Lessons Learned initiatives. Hallet et al. (2009: 43) highlight that Lessons Learned “is an all-hands responsibility”. Internal stakeholders play double role in Lessons Learned systems. First of all, they are the providers of observations, insights and lessons identified, which become the inputs for the organizational learning when submitted through Lessons Learned processes. On the other hand, the internal stakeholders are the beneficiaries of improvements resulted from Lessons Learned activity and identified best practices (cf. NATO LL Handbook, 2011: 3).

Stakeholder involvement in Lessons Learned processes includes: contributing to the system by capturing observations, sharing information and learning from others. Lessons Learned mindset defined as “a desire to incorporate learning from others into all aspects of work as well as the confidence and trust to share own learning with others” (NATO LL Handbook, 2011: 10) seems to be the foundation of this involvement. Mindset is a prerequisite for an internal knowledge market in any organization. Davenport and Prusak (1998: 30-36) notice that effective knowledge markets need a commonly accepted price system and trust between knowledge sellers and buyers (seekers). Ujwary-Gil (2011: 91) enumerates the lack of trust and openness as two fundamental barriers to knowledge sharing. This point of view is shared by military organizations, too. The NATO LL Handbook (2011: 10) states: “A key issue with information sharing is information assurance: the LL information that we submit and receive from the LL capability needs to be trustworthy”.

As observed by Jabłoński and Lis (2012a: 22), there is a kind of the paradox in military lessons Learned systems. Due to their hierarchical and very formal structures, it is challenging for military organizations to develop an experiential learning culture fostering an initiative and creativity of all members. Therefore, buying-in the personnel for the organizational learning and subsequent improvements is one of the key roles of leaders and Lessons Learned staff officers. As already mentioned, this is the commanders' responsibility to promote Lessons Learned and to develop effective motivation programs in order to involve all the personnel. While leaders act as the enablers, Lessons learned staff officers, as highlighted in the NATO LL Handbook (2011: 4), are "central to the organization's efforts to engage everybody in seeing the value of learning lessons".

The development of mindset and organizational culture enhancing information and knowledge sharing is a challenging and long-run business. Nevertheless, military organizations experienced in managing knowledge and learning processes provide inspiring examples of successful solutions in this area. As pointed out by one of the experts, the U.S. Army Center for Army Lessons Learned has experienced three factors crucial for the acceptance for a Lessons Learned programs among soldiers: the After Action Review (AAR) methodology offering honest 360-assessment, the non-attribution of lessons to specific units and the value of products provided by the learning organization to the force.

The After Action Review is a particularly interesting and valuable solution employed in the U.S. Army. The AAR process "conducted after every operation played a major role in transforming how the U.S. Army trained and fought after the Vietnam War" (CALL Handbook, 2011: 63). As the CALL deputy director highlighted during the Lessons Learned Workshops conducted in Bydgoszcz in April 2012, repetitive training and the emphasis on positive outcomes were the keys to the success of the AAR implementation. In one of his papers, he states: "By encouraging free discussion, the AAR permitted subordinates to offer constructive criticism of leader decisions in an open forum. The designers of the AAR and the Army leadership felt that by allowing subordinates to express their opinions openly, the AAR gave the commander the "ground truth" about the performance of the unit. This facet of the AAR precipitated a huge culture shift in the U.S. Army, which had heretofore frowned upon any questioning of leadership decisions, no matter how constructively framed. This culture shift took a while to take hold, but was greatly facilitated by the transformation of the Army from a conscript to an all-volunteer force following the Vietnam War" (Lackey, 2003: 80).

Discussing the engagement of the leaders and all the personnel, the position of Lessons Learned staff officers needs to be recognized and appreciated. They are the key players within the Lessons Learned processes. The NATO LL Handbook (2011: 4) emphasizes their role in "ensuring the organization is a Learning Organization, in ensuring the quality of lessons and recommendations, and



in ensuring all stakeholders are aware of their responsibilities in the process. Finally, it is up to the LLSO to ensure lessons are shared early and widely”. A metaphoric explanation of the responsibilities of Lessons Learned staff officers in the observation and analysis phase is provided by Jabłoński and Lis (2012c). They describe Lessons Learned practitioners as “the ambassadors of the Lessons Learned systems in their units”, “creative seekers of observations”, “editors” supporting the members of their organizations to write an observation in a relevant format and “analysts” verifying observations and then exploring them in-depth. Expanding this catalogue, the following roles of Lessons Learned officers’ can be identified within remaining phases of the Lessons Learned process: “the monitors of remedial actions implementations”, “the editors and disseminators of lessons reports and findings” and “the organizational knowledge brokers”. Taking into account the multidimensional role played by the Lessons Learned staff officers, their motivation, engagement and positive behaviors seem to be crucial to Lessons Learned processes in any organization. Their role is extremely important due to the fact that in the majority of units and headquarters, there are single posts allocated to the full-time Lessons Learned staff officers or the double-hatted officers of primary responsibility (OPR) accomplishing Lessons Learned duties as their second job.

## 5. Conclusion and way ahead

Summing up, the examples collected from the NATO, U.S. and Polish military Lessons Learned communities confirm the significant role played by positive organizational behaviors in experiential learning and organizational improvements implementation. Positive attitudes and behaviors of commanders, Lessons Learned personnel and all servicemen seem to be the key success factors for a Lessons Learned capability. Guidance, engagement in learning processes, and promotion of organizational learning and knowledge exchange are the key roles of military leaders. Stakeholder involvement expressed in capturing observations, sharing information and learning from others is another prerequisite for effective Lessons Learned systems.

In effect of the scientific exploration, the new research question arises: how to develop and strengthen positive organizational behaviors fostering experiential learning in military organizations? In order to operationalize the further survey, the following research problems are identified:

What challenges (problems) are (were) faced by Lessons Learned communities in military organizations concerning: the engagement of leaders, positive mindset, willingness to share information and stakeholder involvement?

What are (were) the solutions to these challenges (problems)? What has already been done? What are the best practices in this area? What can be done in the future?

What other organizational behaviors or the elements of organizational culture and climate are stimulants or obstacles to the Lessons Learned capability development?

Are there any observations, lessons and best practices on managing organizational behaviors which can be exchanged between military organizations and other business and non-profit sectors?

The aforementioned research problems will be explored through interviewing Lessons Learned experts and practitioners. The survey will be conducted among the key personnel of the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre, the U.S. Army Lessons Learned Center and the Polish Armed Forces Doctrine and Training Centre. Moreover, the attempts will be made in order to extend the panel of experts and to include some representatives of international headquarters and other NATO member nations.

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