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The Role of a Commander in Military Lessons Learned Systems

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to investigate the role of a commander in military Lessons Learned systems. In order to achieve the aim, the paper presents (1) the architecture of the Lessons Learned capabilities in the U.S. Army, NATO and the Polish Armed Forces, (2) the commander's role in the Lessons Learned process (3) the commander's role in fostering Lessons Learned organisation culture. The paper is based on multiple case study analysis including Lessons Learned systems in NATO, the U.S. Army and the Polish Armed Forces.

Keywords: leadership, commander, lessons learned, observation, After Action Review (AAR).

1. Introduction

In the seminal book about military command "The Challenge of Command" Roger H. Nye (1986, p. 19) noted that:

> [t]o command is to direct with authority. To command a military organisation is to think and make judgments, employing specialised knowledge and deciding what those commanded will and will not do. To command in wartime is to assume responsibility for taking and saving human lives. To command in peace and war is to direct how

> human beings will conduct themselves towards each other. As such, the commander sets moral standards and sees that they are obeyed. To command, therefore, is to think and decide, to feel and moralise, to act and wield power.

Paraphrasing his words it can be said that a commander will be successful in employing knowledge and saving human lives only if he/she is able to learn from the past and present conflicts and operations. Therefore, it is no accident that Colonel Nye cites in the preface to his book a retired United States Army general Paul Francis Gorman who once asked: "Would the generals of World War I have acted differently, had they taken to heart the lessons of the machine gun and barbed wire that were so evident a decade earlier in the Russo-Japanese War?" (Nye, 1986, p. vii). Today, we are not able to answer the question with absolute certainty but we can predict with a confidence that without gathering and applying lessons from the contemporary battlefield and operations we will repeat the same mistakes in the future. Therefore, the fundamental idea of Lessons Learned systems is to improve performance, either through prevention or avoidance of mistakes, or replication of new successful methods.

Military capabilities are developed through building functional components including: doctrine, organisation, training, material, personnel, leadership, facilities and interoperability (DOTMPLFI). Hallet et al. (2009) discuss the role of aforementioned building blocks in the development of a Lessons Learned capability. As regards leadership they highlight three following functions performed by military commanders for the benefit of Lessons Learned systems: guidance, engagement and promotion. The importance of behavioural aspects for Lessons Learned is pointed out by Sewell (2009), who lists cooperation, communication and coordination among core guiding principles of Lessons Learned systems. Lis (2014) identifies two categories of the antecedents of Lessons Learned systems' effectiveness. The first one includes: structures, procedures, manuals and IT tools supporting Lessons Learned processes. The involvement of commanders, soldiers and civilian employees is listed as the second determinant, while positive leadership is considered to be the prerequisite of these positive behaviours (cf. Lis 2012b).

The aim of the paper is to investigate the role of a commander in Lessons Learned systems. The paper consists of the introduction, three

sections and conclusions. The first section discusses Lessons Learned systems. The second section analyses the commander's role in the Lessons Learned process. The third section studies the commander's role in fostering Lessons Learned organisation culture.

The paper is based on multiple case study analysis including Lessons Learned systems in NATO, the U.S. Army and the Polish Armed Forces. The survey of the literature and the analysis of military publications were main data collection methods applied to achieve the aim of the paper. The research attention was focused on the solutions and approaches applied in NATO, the U.S. Army and in the Polish Armed Forces. Owing to the unlimited distribution of the paper, only unclassified sources were used for analysis. Moreover, the author's hands-on knowledge on the Lessons Learned system as well as observations and insights shared by other military personnel contributed to the paper.

2. Lessons Learned systems

The term Lessons Learned (LL) is holistically used to describe people, things and activities related to the act of learning from experience to achieve improvements (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 1). The Lessons Learned system consists of collection, analysis, dissemination, and archiving of observations, insights, lessons and "best practices" garnered from military training, exercises, combat operations, peacekeeping and stabilisation missions and historical study. The principal aim of the system is to support commanders in the process of improving the warfighting capabilities of the armed forces. However, it should be noticed that a lesson is not learned until there are tangible changes in the way an organisation, a unit or any other entity operates. Therefore, discussing the LL system there is a need to make a clear distinction between observations, lessons identified and lessons learned. A lessons is learned only when it is embedded and then applied. Unlike lessons learned, observations or lessons identified themselves cannot be associated with an improved capability or increased performance.

The Lessons Learned system in the U.S. Army has evolved over 40 years to become a model Lesson Learned system for NATO members and some non-NATO countries throughout the world (Dixon, 2011, p. 227). Thanks to the lessons from different wars and conflicts such as World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973,

the U.S. army periodically rewrites its combat doctrine and introduces changes into training such as the After Action Review (AAR) process, which was implemented in the 1970s (Nye, 1986, p. 66). However, what began as an AAR technique over time has become a robust system of identifying, collecting, analysing, transferring, and moving lessons learned at all levels of command. In 1985, the U.S. Army created the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) at Fort Leavenworth. Since its establishment CALL has grown in size and importance. Today, CALL serves as the central repository for the U.S. Army for learning from experience and provides a model for how to generate knowledge and promote organisational learning in a large operational organisation.

According to the approach adopted in NATO "Lesson Learned is an improved capability or increased performance confirmed by validation when necessary resulting from the implementation of one or more remedial actions for a lesson identified" (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 13). The NATO Lessons Learned process encompasses six steps including observation identification, analysis, endorsement, implementation and validation of remedial actions, and the dissemination of observations and lessons learned. The NATO LL capability consists of three fundamental pillars: structure, process and tools. A defined process, a structure within which stakeholders can clearly identify their role and responsibility and tools to support the staffing, storing, searching and sharing of observations and lessons – all the elements are intertwined and constitute the precondition for a well-functioning LL system. Thanks to them a commander is "equipped" with a capability to capture, analyse and take remedial action on any issue and to communicate and share results to achieve improvement. In NATO, a great emphasis is placed on the assumption that everyone within an organisation is involved in Lessons Learned and contributes to the LL capability. However, the Lessons Learned capability is equally dependent on all the following factors: the engagement of leaders, positive mindset, willingness to share information and stakeholder involvement (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, pp. 9–11).

The NATO's centre for performing joint analysis of current operations, training, exercises and concept development and experimentation collective experiments is Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC). Operational since 2002, the JALLC is located in Lisbon and has a permanent staff of 50 military and civilian personnel. Since its inception, the JALLC's analysis activities have predominantly focused

on operations. JALLC has investigated, understood, identified causes and presented potential solutions to issues that have been raised by commanders of all operations and missions carried out by NATO (e.g. the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and operation Unified Protector) (Sonneby, 2011).

In the Polish Armed Forces, the current Lessons Learned system was implemented in 2012. It replaced the previous system of collecting and disseminating lessons from the outside the country operations, which was introduced in 2007. The institution responsible for organising, coordinating and managing the system is the Doctrine and Training Centre of the Polish Armed Forces (DTC PAF) situated in Bydgoszcz. The permanent Lessons Learned structures are embedded in the headquarters at the strategic and operational levels of command. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge to the system is the fact that at the tactical level (with few exceptions) there is lack of LL full-time personnel and the system is managed by dual-hatted officers, who have to split their effort into conducting duties stated in job descriptions and as LL officers (Jabłoński and Lis, 2012, pp. 172–173).

3. The commander's role in the Lessons Learned process

Commanders at each level have a vital role to play in ensuring that lessons are learned in support of the improvement of operations. This role includes establishing the LL mindset across their commands, setting expectations for subordinates in the gathering and analysis of observations, tasking remedial action bodies and following up on that tasking to ensure lessons have been learned by those under their command who need to learn them (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 13).

The organisational leadership must provide priorities at all the stages of the Lessons Learned process to guide command and analysts' attention focus. This focus direction requires selecting the crucial areas of observation, and screening the resulting observations for those issues worthy of further analysis. It is not possible to holistically deal with each dimension of every issue – prioritisation of effort is vital and must include not only prioritising issues to observe, but also the scope and the type of implementation activities. In setting those priorities, the commander must provide guidance as to (Hallet, 2010, p. 24):

- in what areas observations are vital to the command;

- what resources can be dedicated to lessons identified to implement them;
- what external organisations should be approached to facilitate the Lessons Identified (LI) implementation if the implementation of LI is beyond the resources of the organisation;
- how the remedial actions should be executed;
- how the remedial actions should be validated once they have generated the desired effects;
- what degree of effort should be dedicated to the issue;
- what aspects of the recommended remedial actions are necessary and what aspects are of secondary importance.

Leaders at each level of command must explain, through, for example command directives or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), what they want their staffs to do in regard to Lessons Learned. In many cases, this guidance may simply require tailoring higher-level guidance to the specific circumstances of the command. In other situations, this guidance may need clarification, specifying, for example, how to implement Lessons Learned processes in the operational activities or how to share Lessons Learned with other units and institutions (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 13).

Commanders at the tactical level must provide their subordinates with clear guidance on what kind of observations, where and when they should collect them. Commanders should create favourable conditions for the collection of observations. One of the most important tools they have at their disposal is the After Action Review process. According to many scholars what makes the Army's learning system most effective is the process of After Action Review with its "unique emphasis of focusing on learning system during and immediately after an event and applying what is learned as quickly as possible back into action" (Baird et al., 1997, p. 387). It is worth noticing that AAR is one of the main sources of collecting and identifying observations. Thanks to the AAR process the US Army in 2008 alone collected 20,000 observations, insights, and lessons (Dixon, 2011, p. 228). However, it would not have been possible if the commanders had not created an atmosphere conducive to sharing information during After Action Reviews.

Yet, in a military organisation, observations must not be perceived solely as outputs from operations, training, exercises and experiments. The greatest importance of observations lies in their subsequent exploitation as inputs to improve the preparation of future activities.

The emphasis should be on the application rather than the collection of observations. The quantity of observations does not necessarily translate into the quality of them. To put it differently, unless observations are "best practices" or become lessons learned they cannot be used to include in the process of developing new doctrines. Their usefulness as observations will be very limited (cf. Lis, 2014, pp. 66–67).

One of the most common misconceptions about Lessons Learned among some commanders is the direct association of the LL process with evaluation and assessment processes. If a LL system is perceived by commanders as part of evaluation, it will have a very negative impact on their subordinates. In such a situation, it is "against the interests" of the subordinates to share observations and lessons as it may lead to a lower grade. Commanders, thanks to the familiarisation with LL ideas, should understand that while evaluation is concerned with grading performance, the LL process is concerned only with improving performance. As a result of this awareness, the knowledge gained from a LL system can be placed in the foreground and the mistakes and the people who made them, can remain in the background (Hallet, 2010, p. 26).

Leadership support is critical in the endorsement of the remedial action and tasking of the action body. Without command direction on the remedial action and action body, the lesson will likely stall in the LL process as the organisation will fail to complete the action necessary to 'institutionalise' the learning. The leadership should take ownership of the 'business case' (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 40). The endorsement act will be a mere formality in cases where a commander is asked to endorse remedial actions generated by his/her own organisation. In such a situation, a commander will be familiar with the entire process as he/she has provided constant guidance on a recommended remedial action. However, in situations where the recommended remedial actions were generated by an external organisation there are likely to be cases of disagreement concerning the relative importance or even justification of various recommendations (Hallet, 2010, p. 25).

Once endorsement and tasking is complete, it is time for implementation and monitoring of the remedial action. The action body tasked with the remedial action should develop a remedial action plan for implementation. To assist in the monitoring of the remedial action plan, a small number of significant milestones should be defined. The leadership should monitor these key milestones to measure success of

the remedial action plan implementation. The remedial action process is susceptible to many risks that can delay or halt completion of the remedial action. Common pitfalls include inappropriate or circuitous business processes, lack of quality staffing, lack of adequate resources, and lack of adequate training for staff involved in the process. Leadership engagement greatly mitigates these risks. Where leadership engagement is good, identified remedial action implementation is not lost in the shuffle of the daily business and thus falls behind schedule until the Lesson Identified becomes useless (NATO LL Handbook, 2011, p. 36).

4. The commander's role in fostering Lessons Learned organisational culture

While all the military and civilian personnel should be engaged in the Lessons Learned activities, the successful implementation and functioning of Lessons Learned is especially dependent on the awareness and engagement of the command leadership. As observed by Lis (2012a, p. 87) "The Lessons Learned process is time-, effort- and resources-consuming. 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". Lessons Learned leadership is essential to foster an organisational culture that not only accepts the need for the organisation self-examination that underpins a successful Lessons Learned program, but embraces it. Strong leadership engagement in Lessons Learned activities will enable the command to apply the knowledge from their own experiences and the experiences of the others to significantly improve mission accomplishment. Experiences from recent operations and research show that the essential difference between LL systems that works and those that do not is leadership engagement (McNichol, 2011). Thus the role of the commander is to create a culture promoting the behaviours of reapplying lessons. The good commander creates a favourable climate in which there is not only a willingness to share but also a willingness to learn. He himself takes the lead in that willingness to learn.

Leadership is the determining factor in a LL process. LL processes are often personality driven because the commander's engagement and

support of LL process are directly reflected in the outcome. Most often it is the commanders' own choice which resources are dedicated to a LL process. The commander might e.g. assign duties of a LL Staff Officer or a LL Officer of Primary Responsibility to an experienced and motivated individual or to delegate them to an officer with the fewest immediate tasks. The latter is often untrained and inexperienced in the field of LL.

The role of the commander is also to dispel the misconception that LL are a bureaucratic step in the conclusion of an operation or exercise, rather than a vital step in the preparation and planning of the next operation or exercise. LL is not only about writing up the observations. Soldiers must recognise that there is a link between staffing observed deficiencies and problems and improved operational effectiveness and lives saved (McNichol, 2011).

Therefore, a commander should realise and make his/her subordinates aware that knowledge itself does not change behaviour. It needs to be applied to be of value. A commander should also be able to see the difference between those problems that are e.g. the result of mere negligence, human error or violation of the regulations and those observations that constitute a systemic problem and have the potential to become lessons learned worth sharing. What is even more important, commanders should understand that unsolved problems will recur at a later stage of their careers with even more severe consequences. It will come back like a boomerang. If a battalion commander does not deal with an encountered problem, pretending it does not exist, he/she will be discredited in the eyes of his superior or will be confronted by it when he/she becomes a brigade commander himself/herself. Then, however, the situation might be exacerbated and he/she loses the credibility among his/her subordinates. In a worst-case scenario commander's inattention might be a contributing factor to losses of lives.

A perfect example of the LL process working thanks to commanders' engagement is IED (Improvised Explosive Device) training. Each IED incident is documented and analysed with the aim of finding friendly forces' responses and counteractions to new enemy TTPs (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures) and equipment. Such an analysis leads to recommendations for better mitigation of enemy TTPs and/or new equipment as required to reduce the impact of IEDs. These results are quickly and widely disseminated and incorporated

into mission training and planning, saving lives. The IED process is successful because it has wide support at all levels of command, and assigned proper time and support. Besides, every soldier perceives the tangible link between the observation/analysis process and lives saved (McNichol, 2011).

A commander should not only be aware of the Lessons Learned system, but he/she should also promote the proper attitude towards LL among his/her subordinates. A commander in relationships with his/her subordinates continually shows the significance he/she places on the Lessons Learned system. While self-assured he/she should not create the aura of own infallibility because it will discourage his/her subordinates from sharing with him/her their doubts and observations. Besides, incentives are required to motivate action, and therefore appropriate incentive creation is a vital aspect of leader's promotion of the Lessons Learned capability as a tool for organisational improvement. Positive incentives are necessary in order to overcome natural resistance to sharing deficiencies. Subordinates should know that their actions taken in the area of LL not only serve the common good but also are appreciated and rewarded by a commander. What is more, establishing incentives is extremely important to overcome the human, psychological resistance to externalise own problems and deficiencies and motivate human behaviours favourable for learning, sharing knowledge and introducing changes (Lis, 2012a, p. 87).

5. Conclusion

The traditional measure of leadership comes down to the question whether an organisation performed its tasks, fulfilled its obligations, and accomplished its missions. However, these are all short-term goals. Long-range leadership means that leaders are not preoccupied with perfection and short-term goals that look good but have little impact on improving the organisation. Leaders must work to build a climate that encourages prudent risk taking and creativity, exercises command that tolerates honest mistakes, promotes learning and sharing lessons and good practices. By providing the guidance for observation, prioritisation of implementation activities and creation of the incentives for subordinates to enthusiastically participate in the Lessons Learned process, leaders play an essential role to ensure the resources expended on the

Lessons Learned capability provide a worthwhile return on investment or we are focused on Lessons Learned not as an aim in itself, but as a means to improved mission accomplishment.

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