Sharing Knowledge: How to Highlight Proven Experience in the Swedish Armed Forces

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ABSTRACT

Working with the reuse of knowledge is a widespread effort in many organizations, a common approach being to collect and make use of experience. In the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF), this activity is not handled in an organized way, as a methodological and systematic approach to handling experience, transforming experience into Proven experience and finally reusing it in the organization is lacking. This paper is concerned with practitioners' efforts to share and reuse knowledge for the purpose of improving their professional competence. The aim is to develop and provide a method for transforming experience into Proven experience. A solution to this complicated problem could reduce repetition of mistakes and facilitate for of high-quality Proven experience, not just in SwAF but also in other organizations.

Keywords

Experience, Proven experience, Knowledge Sharing, Knowledge Reuse, the Swedish Armed Forces

INTRODUCTION

Crisis Management operations and the Armed Forces are similar in some specific ways, both often performing under time pressure and at high risk to human lives. Like most organizations in the Crisis Management sector, the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) want to improve by attaining a more effective and efficient way of managing knowledge and information. One common approach is to attempt to collect and make use of experience. There is different kind of experience and we will focus on three diverse types, all from the SwAF international missions. Firs of all, experience of success, incidents to attain to repeat. Secondly, experience of failure, unwanted incident that should be avoided. And finally, new way to attain or avoid attaining, effects in a special task or incident. If those experience is handled in a scientific manner, correctly formulated and subjected to systematic critical discussion, they can be considered Proven experience and an acceptable foundation for Lessons that should be Lessons Learned (Brehmer, Bergström, 2006). Systems for this purpose are called Lessons Learned (LL) - systems, occasionally used in governmental organizations such as the US Department of Defence (DoD), American Space Agency (NASA), United Nation (UN) and European Space Agency (ESA) (Weber and Aha, 2002; Paxton, 2005; Adamson and von Kaltenborn-Stachau 2002; WGLL, 2008). Those organizations have one important thing in common: they all incur costly mission failure. They also work with accident prevention to minimize the risk to human lives (Weber et al., 2002). A similar concern is seen in the medical sector, where work with best practice or Proven experience is a common initiative. Within organ donation work, for example, Proven experience has turned out to be a great success (Perleth, Jakubowski and Busse, 2000). Our paper is concerned with how practitioners in organizations develop and share best practice and knowledge.

SYNTHESIS OF PRIOR RESEARCH

During the last decade, the SwAF have on multiple occasions tried, to implement LL-systems in different parts of the organization by collecting, analyzing and categorizing experience from international missions. Various kinds of technical support systems have been developed to handle the results but in most cases the projects do not achieve widespread use and eventually fall into disuse (Pettersson, 2008; Ranhagen, 2001).

However, there are attempts to bring back experience, (success as well as failure) into the organization for the purpose of reuse. Individuals with experience from international missions are on some occasions invited to lecture at SwAF schools, such as the Swedish National Defence College (SNDC). There are also meetings after every mission rotation, involving the individuals coming home and the ones going on the next mission, participation taking one to two days. SwAF succeeds in its scattered attempts to bring back and instil experience into the organization but such experience is often of an individual character and the retrieval process is not a systemized one. There is no over-arching analysis to decide what experience should be instilled or any over-arching assessment of the results. Within the current process, just a few experiences will be transformed into Proven experience (Pettersson, 2008).

Experience or Proven Experience

Experience is not the same as Proven experience – if it was the word 'Proven' would be superfluous. Firstly, Proven experience is when one individual's personal property becomes the property of a community. As such, Proven experience belongs to a community sharing equal tasks, experience and competences (Josefson 2001). This concern can also be described as, when knowledge is transferred from world two to world three (Popper 1979). In the SwAF, Proven experience is what colleagues in the organization agree to be the right way of solving a situation or problem – which is insufficient basis for how professional skills or decision making are practiced in a profession. However, this is not enough, the experiences the SwAF collects, must be subjected to systematic critical discussion, correctly formulated and indisputable documented. Not until now, the experience can attain the status Proven experience, and finally be acceptable foundation for Lessons that should be Lessons Learned (Brehmer et al., 2006). The Proven experience can contain scientific fact, but also input that does not classify as scientific knowledge. The Proven experience will serve as foundation for education and recommendations within the organization. An example of Proven experience in the SwAF are, *mission command.* It has not been scientific proofed but history has showed that mission command seams to be the best way to lead in war. This is well documented and also what SwAF schools teach (Van Creveld, 1985; FM, 2001).

Without theory, experience has no meaning and there will be no learning. To make a prediction we need theory, without prediction, experience and examples teach nothing. *"To copy an example of success without understanding it with the aid of theory may lead to disaster"* (Deming, 2000 p.103).

Argyris (1965) emphasized action in the learning process. Learning occurs every time a mistake is observed and corrected, and the mistake is defined as an occasion which creates conflict between consequences and intention. He also emphasized the difference between experience and learning from experience. There is no guarantee that an individual learns something simply through a unique experience (Argyris, 1965). Brehmer (1980) points out two difficulties in this topic. First, it is difficult to see that there *is* something to learn and secondly *what* should be learned, from a specific experience. Centre for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) is an intelligence unit within the US Army. The unit is specified on knowledge refinement, and is an inspiring illustration of knowledge reuse. CALL works with four cornerstones: event selection, data collection, knowledge distillation and dissemination of knowledge. The key to avoiding repetition of the same mistakes is to systematize and document attempts to attain Proven experience accurately (Chua, Lam and Majid 2005).

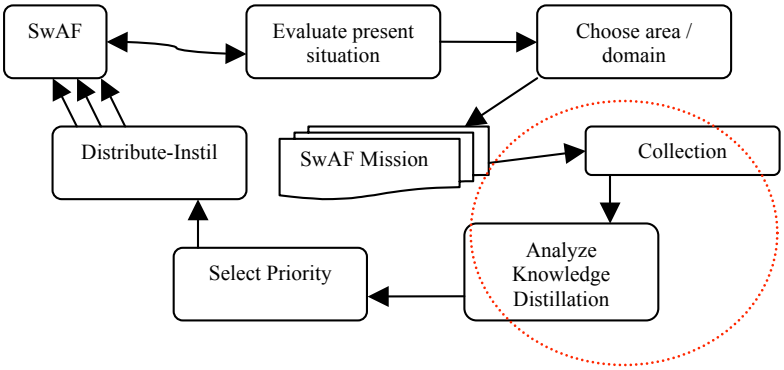

Figure 1. Outline for Lesson Learned cycle

To improve and get better, SwAF must utilize experience after international missions, handling it in a systematic and organized way in order to obtain Proven experience. It should then be instilled back into the organization with the aim of reducing friction. The main focus of this work is to develop a fragment of a whole LL-cycle (see Figure 1). The long-term aim is to develop, test and provide a method for transforming experience into Proven experience. A solution of its complicatedness could reduce repetition of mistakes and also facilitate re-enactment of Proven experience, in terms to achieve improvements within the SwAF and also in outer organization.

STATE OF THE ART

A World of Rapid Change and the Need for Proven Experience

Industrial war has become "war amongst the people" (Smith, 2007 p.267). This rapid change can be recognized in several characteristic ways, the fight on the battlefield has moved into civilian territory and two-state conflicts have developed into timeless battles in the presence of non-state parties. Another significant characteristic is the western world attempts to preserve its force rater than risk it, it could be a constraints for the organization. They are also implementing new methods of using weapons from the industrial war (Smith, 2007).

The previous main responsibilities for the SwAF (e.g., during the cold war) where primarily related armed protection of the Swedish territory and readiness for combat an armed attack. Today, SwAF's main tasks are to carry out international missions, assert Sweden's national integrity and support Swedish society in major crises. One of the dilemmas is that the organization has to serve in several conceivable situations and environments (Berggren, 2007).

Unique Breakthrough in the Medical Sector

The US Organ Donation Breakthrough Collaborative also called the Collaborative, has developed a unique method of dramatically increasing access to transplantable organs. *"The collaborative process, bringing teams together over time to implement rapid change in healthcare organization, not only works, but should be seen as the way to bring about transformation throughout the healthcare system"* (Shafer, Wagner, Chessare, Zampiello, McBride and Perdue, 2006 p. 14). This effort has led not only to shaping an organization more focused on learning, but also to saving many lives.

PRELIMINARY SKETCH OF METHODOLOGY

Our starting point has been "Success and Failure Factors for KM: The Utilization of Knowledge in the Swedish Armed Forces" (Pettersson 2008), our paper demonstrating that SwAF had and still have obvious problems in managing all sorts of experience from international missions. We have carried out Database searches on, for example, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore and PubMed for relevant articles on best practice and Proven experience. Further on, literature and articles published in Acta Psychologica and the Journal of Information Science has been read. Finally, we have outlined a method for how the SwAF could have potential to transform experience into Proven experience. Experiments with this method will take place in 2009.

Proposal for Attaining Proven Experience

This section contains a proposal for a study that may potentially lead to a method for transforming experiences into Proven experience. In short, the method (see Figure. 2) builds on the belief in joint effort and consensual thought, starting with a diverse [A.] expert-group of who are specially trained to handle the method. This group will decide on an [B.] area (within international missions), from which experience or tasks from existing reports can be selected, while also making provision for the Swedish Armed Forces International Centre, SNDC, SwAF and International missions to make a nominations list of issues they wish to be raised in the discussion. Input is also allowed from national civil, international military and international civil organizations. The expert-group will choose between four to six [C.] experiences, tasks or problems in the same area and invite relevant participants for their discussion. The [D.] participants (who are specialists in the relevant area) must have the tasks in advance in order to prepare for the consensus meeting. After the expert-group [E/1.] presents the chosen task (perhaps supported by participants in the relevant domain) [E/2.] consensus questions such as 'What exactly is the problem / experience?', 'What can be learned from the problem / experience, 'What alternatives are there for improving the problem / experience?' and 'What difficulties (such as doctrines, laws, security management) exist?' can be raised. The results from the consensus meeting must then be carefully [F.] documented no matter of outcome. Several challenges remain, such as managing issues of rank among officers in these discussions. The initiative must have whole-hearted support from SwAFs HQ.

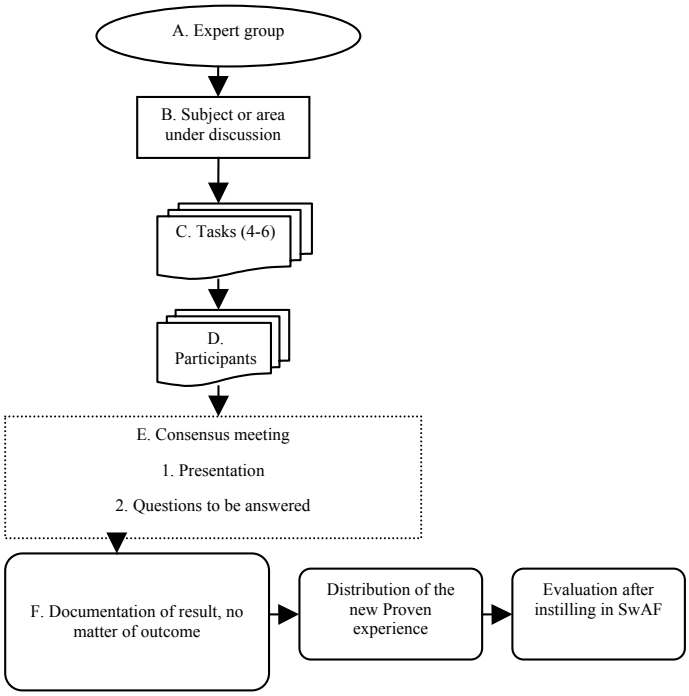

Figure 2. Outline of Method

CONCLUSSION

In the military domain, very little research has been conducted on how to manage experience. There are just a few and not well evaluated methods of obtaining Proven experience, such as the doctrine development (where proposal on changes often is circulated for comments within the organization). Also there is lack of efficient evaluating on how important Proven experience is, and how they influence the military organization. Our paper includes a proposal for a study that can have the potential to develop and improve a method to attain Proven experience. Our expectation is that the SwAF can reach progress and increase result in actually learn from experience, as is successfully done in the health sector. If our proposed method is used, we believe experience can attain Proven experience and that ought to enrich and improve the organization. The method, built on joint effort and consensual thought, will facilitate to overcome the problem to actually learn from experience emphasized by Argyris (1965) and Brehmer (1980).

A solution of this problem could reduce repetition of mistakes and facilitate re-enactment of high-quality Proven experience, not just in SwAF but also in other organizations.

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