

## **Learning for the Future Makes a Business More Sustainable**

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We have all heard that we need to learn your lessons to be able to improve, but this fact has never be truer than today where each and every day businesses seem to suffer excess costs and continuous waste, making the same mistakes time after time repeatedly increasing costs that they tell so many that they cannot offer to incur.

So how do we learn through our operational actions and our project deliveries to make our organisation or business more sustainable?

As always, the answer is a simple one, not the word is simple not easy. Simplicity has been underrated for far too long with corporations in some cases going to the wall rather than accepting that there can be an answer to their problems by some simple solution development.

So, where should we start, well let's try at the beginning for now but remember that because this model has been designed with simplicity in mind, you can step in at any time and use the tools.

The key thing to remember about sustainability, or running a sustainable business is that everything starts with **Governance**.

It is important to understand your own business and to realise what you are going into and if you are to be a success, then what does success look like and how will you be able to measure it?

By recognising the regulations and standards that you have to adhere to, this will be able to establish your scope and capability before you start out or before you look into changing your organisations structure and direction.



In addition, by gaining an understanding of the relevant standards and regulations you know that to be truly success that will be the benchmark at which to aim, but not to say that it makes you successful, but simply to say that you are relevant and 'in the game'. The aim of the business is not simply to achieve the standards or the regulations but to surpass them and then look to achieve greater and new goals.

Once the ground has been laid and it is clearer to you where you are and what you will have to do to be successful, then you can start to look at your own **corporate** setup. One of the first considerations that you have to make is what kind of organisational structure you are going to have or what you already have in existence and what may or may not need changing. By understanding how your business already functions or how you want it to function this allows you to establish your own rules and regulations and constraints and methods that your business will work to.

After all, you already know what the legislative and regulatory bodies have said, so those are outside your control, but establishing your own structure and approach is what will differentiate your business from the others.



Are you an organisation that needs to have many levels or tiers of management or are you more suited to a collegiate approach to management? Understanding your managerial structure then starts to set your own corporate governance system which leads to how and who will work in what environments and how to best utilise what you have.

Here, you will also establish the working processes and procedures which will lead to each of the functional elements that make up your business model, covering topics such as communication channels, financial limitations and reporting or recruiting processes. All of these are what will establish your long term values and will allow you to set your goals and objectives.

Having now set your goals and objectives for both long and short term, it is important that you now assess your **Assets**.

Having decided the path or route that your business is going to take, it is important you have the right people and the right equipment and facilities to deliver them. Your first task within this section of sustainable development is to recognise and understand what assets you own, what you use and what you have responsibility for.



Your assets are typically broken down into two categories, those that are considered consumables such as raw materials or money where once you have used the stock that you have they require replenishing and then non-consumables, such as equipment, buildings and most important of all, your people. Having now understood what you have, it is important to understand how many of each asset you hold and how many you feel you need to achieve the goals and objectives that you set in your corporate step.

Here you will start to understand your holdings and realise what is truly essential and what may be surplus to requirement. This is a very important step in establishing your sustainable future as you will see as we progress through the full model. Further to this question, it is not only the numbers or volume of your assets but also the current status or condition of each of these assets. This is far easier to demonstrate when you look at an item of equipment that you hold to ask what state of repair or disrepair it is in or what the true value of that item is because of how long you have had it in the business or what it can do or deliver for you.

When you view your assets as people, now you can start to ask yourself what strengths and weaknesses exist within your current setup and what needs to change or if as a newly established business, what skill sets or competences are important to you to make your business a success.

Now you know your businesses capabilities, it is essential that you start to use them in your delivery of your business **Operations**.

Simply having a great team or the best equipment is no guarantee for success. How many times have you heard the phrase, "It is not what you have but how you use it"?

Establishing the right team feeling within the operations of your business means that when a team becomes self-motivated and self-driven it is more likely to be successful under the right guidance. To create this environment of growth and improvement you must understand what processes and procedures you have for each department to try and find out how each one runs and then why it runs in that way.



Once you have a clearer understanding of the operating procedures and the systems within your organisation, this can then lead to looking for areas of harmonisation to see whether there are areas within the business that can share best practice and knowledge and therefore look towards one standard for delivery or operation.

Although this has been simplified possibly far too much, the principle remains, however you must also recognise that each department, region, or culture may have a slight difference and in recognising this, embracing it and then exploiting this within your business this will create a standard that is recognised by all under one roof but still allows and realises that individual, cultural and social difference exist and have a benefit for your business.

Now you have your operations functionally sound this will generate the growth that you had determined within your goals and within your corporate objectives. However, in a truly sustainable existence, standing still at this time creates an existence where you are actually falling behind. The important part of business development and sustainability is knowing what to change, how to change and when to change.

As we all know, the most successful way to make a change to any business is through **Project Delivery**.



approach?

To understand your best way to change you must exam your current style of project management within your organisation, is there a standard delivery framework or methodology that you are using or is project delivery more random and ad-hoc in its

Much as before it is important to understand if there is a difference why that difference exists and if it is essential due to the department or the region in which the projects are taking place or whether it is simply through ease (discretionary) or that it is essential because of the type of delivery or the regulations and legislations in that area or discipline (mandatory).

Once you understand this it is important to see what departments within your organisation deliver projects and which are simply impacted by them. By understanding this relationship it may be able to identify why certain projects are delivered more successfully than others.

One final question at this time you must ask yourself is what the project maturity within your organisation is and how your organisation or business understands and delivers project management. By understanding how your project management framework or methodology is being managed and maintained and then how your projects are measured for success or for continuous improvement will assist you in knowing what areas will cope with change better than others.

It is at this point in the journey we can introduce to you the essence of the lessons learned approach to find a constant feedback into business model allowing the opportunity to learn both good and bad about each and every change. That said, lessons learned does not have to simply apply to the project management or the project delivery, you can look at each and every aspect of your business and ask the same questions, challenging why things are done a certain way and what change might really mean before you start to disrupt the norm.

Capturing and utilising knowledge is a key requirement to ensure best practice in all aspects of the business and particularly in projects. In any diverse or distributed working environment lessons learned in one aspect of the business or project or in one location or department may be missed by others from differing areas.

Several mechanisms can assist in ensuring that lessons learned are communicated effectively and best practice is transferred from one business unit to another. One of these is a well-structured and maintained Lessons Learned Database.

To provide this functionality, businesses need to provide the appropriate technologies and behaviours to capture and make available the lessons they have learned and then to ensure that those lessons are then utilised in the most effective manner. Having the right

technology takes time to create if you are making something specific for your own needs, however there are many methods that are ready and available and one of the most robust and trustworthy systems available at this time can be found at Praxis, under the governance and authority of its author, Adrian Dooley.

Whatever you decide to do, your Lessons Learned Database must have some simple basics to make it most effective:

- Simple structured data entry
- A notification system to inform users that entries have been added
- A search capability
- A validation capability
- High visibility and simple yet secure accessibility to all staff and external users as appropriate

Accumulation and perpetuation of the knowledge gained throughout the business should be perceived as an ongoing process rather than a discrete and fixed timely action. Where possible, lessons should be captured and communicated as soon as possible to ensure they are maximised for the business to give the greatest benefit to the learning for everyone.

Prior to initiating a project or a new piece of business and at all checkpoints and validation points after the start the business or project manager should review the learning requirements for their work, ascertain what knowledge is required and where it should be sought. Answers may already be inside the Lessons Learned Database, however this should not be the only solution sought and the business or project managers should seek knowledge through the relevant channels including speaking with key working groups, departments and individuals.

However, at this point it is important that the business or project manager now look to contextualise that learning rather than taking the raw data as this can be misleading and unhelpful. Meetings, peer reviews and peer assists are far more valuable than an entry in any database or written report.

The tool most recognised for contextualisation is PESTLE.

PESTLE itself is not a physically element that can be measured. It is instead more of a high level assessment that is done initially at the early stages of the project or business change to allow the Management Team to better understand the complexities of the project that they may be about to embark on.

Dealing with each one individually, the P for Political would be gauged by the Management Team to understand whether the work is going to be received either with or without popularity due to the subject matter of the work and how this is currently perceived by Political Parties and by Governing bodies. Understanding the indications that are likely to come from the authorities can prepare the team for likely outcomes and in some cases can assist with Stakeholder Analysis.

Using the first E as Economical, the Management Team must understand what limitations, if any at all it has on budget. This does not necessarily mean how much money you have to spend on the project, more what impact the project might have on the money that could be generated from either completing the work or ignoring the project.

The S or Sociological element to the equation can best be explained by using a simple example. If a project is going to have an implication on, let's say children's increased safety or security at school, then the pressure that may be applied to carry out such a change could be immense and understanding the softer issues and their specific implications if not carried out as well as the likely benefits from this project, even if not a truly tangible or measured deliverable must be realized.

The T (Technological) element is a clear understanding of what environment the work or project is going to take place in and the equipment or the state of the technology being used in the change. Selecting the necessary approach to the change and which method or direction you are accepting for the change is highly dependent on the technological background that the project is using, whether new or old the Management Team must be able to identify from this the potential constraints and risks associated with the selected style.

The L (Legal) element is again able to be broken down into two specific areas. The first and easiest to understand and appreciate is what legal rules or regulations that you must abide by because of a particular type of work or area of work that is going to be completed within the change. These are specific and binding and are able to be pre-defined prior to any work being carried out or planned. The second area is the legal implications whilst you are carrying out the tasks within the change, affecting the Health and Safety and the working rules such as if applicable, confined spaces rules. This area should be reviewed early to protect not only and primarily the team that will be working on the change, but the Management Team as well.

The final element from PESTLE is the E (Ecological) issue. Here it is important to assess where the work is going to take place and whether or not this impacts on other issues such as for example nesting areas or protected or listed areas. This will make the Management Team review what they can and more importantly cannot do in these environments and what restrictions are automatically applied to the change's scope and approach.

All these elements are assessments made by judgment calls and research by the Management Team, but known can be actually given a score or measurement. When looking deeper into the PESTLE elements and reviewing their effects on stakeholder, risk or resource impacts, these aspects of the project may then be measured as you would using the same tools and techniques as you do routinely within business and project management.

Now, back to those all important lessons.

There may be occasions when required knowledge cannot be located by one department or from an organisation and so researching outside the normal bounds of the business may provide the necessary answer to the situation. A facility to enable a 'Lessons Missing' should be created to allow these to be either posted directly to a centralised email network or passively through a 'Bulletin Board' approach will provide an essential a valuable additional resource. By making these queries visible for the network will have two benefits, firstly it will encourage debate amongst the users and it may also provide pointers to existing resources thus eliminating the necessity to reinvent the wheel once more, something that too many businesses and projects continue to do.

A notification system to alert users that a query has been posted similar to that of the distribution process mentioned earlier will ensure that requests are not missed. With the number of electronic messaging systems available today this 'social network' approach to posting questions should be readily and easily accessible to any company.

One thing to consider, is that it is fine creating a system, but as we said earlier, we are trying to continuously improve what we are doing to maintain and sustain the business long into the future, therefore lessons learned is one thing, but 'Applied Learning' is another step further.

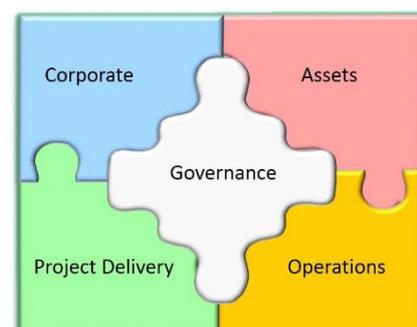
In some circumstances there may be a need for entries to the Lessons Learned Database to trigger an immediate action to be carried out right across the business. As such, there may need to be a company wide distribution of a specific lesson or to a target audience, who will have to ensure that the lesson is applied and actioned, monitoring its implementation and recording outcomes of all the actions taken.

It is only through this approach of applying your lessons and ensuring that they are implemented effectively and then monitored and controlled as a change when they are needed and not simply at the end of a business change or project that can lead to truly mature existence in a sustained business or project environment.

However, remember this, no matter how mature or not your organisation is, change essential for continued growth and existence, no matter how small that change may have to be, so do not shy away from it embrace the change and understand that you are making a difference for a better future for your business, your organisation and for those that represent and are employed within it.

### **Overview and Summary**

- **Governance** sets the rules and guidelines by which your organisation must exist
- You should establish a clear understanding of the rules before proceeding to your **Corporate Environment**
- Your Corporate **Environment** is based upon you know and understanding your own context for the



- discipline or the type of business you are entering or exist
- The best tool for assessing business or project context is **PESTLE**
  - By designing your **Corporate Environment** correctly this will establish your **tactical and strategic planning**
  - The **Strategic Planning** that you set within your organisation will require you to understand and to know your current and future **Assets**
  - By rating, ranking and understand the capability of each and every **Asset** this will allow you to ensure that you gain optimised **utilisation**
  - With optimised **utilisation** within your **assets** this will lead to greater productivity within your **operations**
  - When your **operations** are working with greatest productivity this will mean that you as an organisation have **efficiency** at the most suitable rate for your business
  - As the **efficiency** improves this leads to a need for further growth or opportunity for continuous improvement, this is best done through the **Project Delivery Environment**
  - The best way to instigate a change into your organisation is through an **effective and structured project delivery environment**
  - By delivering projects in a structured and **effective** manner this means that they must have a structured and disciplined **Governance** which when brought together with the business processes and procedures and the standards, regulations and legislation of the overall **governance** step leads to **eliminating waste, optimising processes** and **improving utilisation** of your **assets** for a more **efficient operational** procedure and **effective** change management

## About the Author



### **Mark Reeson**

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Professor Mark Reeson is a project management specialist with over thirty years' experience, a Fellow of the Association of Project Management, he has been involved in many project and programme consultative roles.

Most recently he was appointed a Professor of Project Management at the University of Business and Technology, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which was a culmination of his great work in training and consulting in the region on matters that relate to project management, supply chain management and sustainability modelling. Having previously held the position of a specialist Sustainability Management Global Advisor he has moved on from that position and now regularly supports businesses and projects alike in streamlining their approaches to chain and strategy providing greater longevity in their business planning.

Having started his career in the Royal Air Force, Mark has continued to develop by working and delivering projects in the nuclear, training and international sporting fields.

Mark has developed his role through further experience with the nuclear industry and is now the owner of M R Project Solutions and fulfils the role of Project Management Advisor. His role is very much client facing and Mark now almost permanently travels the world meeting clients and training and developing their project families either directly through his own organisation or in support of the International Institute for Learning. Mark's main role is the development and the consultation with many organisations on ensuring they choose the right approach or methodology to deliver their projects and then follows this up with the correct bespoke training programmes for how their company wants to share this learning with their staff members.

Mark has also just launched his 'Living Learning for Children' programme from which he promised to take project management learning and behaviour out of the adult classroom and into the schools and colleges looking to develop the technical, behavioural and contextual skills and attitudes of their pupils.

As a regular public speaker Mark now shares his experience, knowledge and commitment for free with those associations wanting to move forward in a more sustainable and successful manner.

Mark's next aim is to develop this further and to spread both the PMI and the IPMA knowledge and competency to many more organisations worldwide, having already started with successful deliveries in Europe, Africa, Asia and North America using his unique 'Applied Learning' approach to education.

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