

Getting the Lesson Right

A thinking tool for Step 9 (Reflect and Learn) of the Decision Cycle

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Recording what happened is straightforward. Knowing what to take from it is harder. This tool helps you extract the right lesson from a decision - not just what occurred, but what it tells you about your thinking, your process, and your judgment. Use it alongside the Learning Log and After-Action Review. The Log records events. This tool examines what those events mean.

SNAPSHOT The decision being reviewed

The decision Summarise it in one sentence	
Outcome What actually happened?	
Date of decision / Date of review	

How to use this tool

Use this tool after completing a Learning Log entry, or when reflecting on any significant decision. Work through the three parts in order.

Part 1 - Is this a mistake or a learning experience? Not every bad outcome is a mistake. Getting the distinction right prevents false self-criticism and ensures process failures are identified and acted on.

Part 2 - What is the non-obvious lesson? The lesson you reach immediately is usually not the most useful one. This part helps you look beneath the surface.

Part 3 - Have you got the right lesson? The most common error in reviewing decisions is attributing outcomes to the wrong cause. This part tests whether you are blaming or crediting the right thing.

The carry-forward section records what you will specifically do differently as a result.

PART 1 Mistake or learning experience?

Not every bad outcome is a mistake - and not every mistake produces a bad outcome. Getting this distinction right matters. Treating a learning experience as a mistake leads to false self-criticism and erodes confidence without producing improvement. Treating a mistake as unavoidable means the process flaw that caused it goes uncorrected.

A mistake	A learning experience
Something you should have done differently given what you knew at the time.	A decision made with reasonable process and the best information available at the time, where the outcome was worse than hoped.
The process was flawed - an assumption made without testing, a step skipped, a signal ignored that was available to you.	The outcome was influenced partly or wholly by factors you could not have known or controlled. The same process, on another occasion, could have produced a better result.
The outcome would probably have been better with a different process.	The lesson is about limits and uncertainty - not about a flaw in your approach.
The question to ask: Should I have known or done this differently?	The question to ask: Could I reasonably have known or done this differently?

Which applies here? <i>Mistake / Learning experience / Elements of both (explain below)</i>	
The key indicator <i>What is the main reason for your classification?</i>	
If a mistake: what specifically went wrong in the process?	

PART 2 The non-obvious lesson

The lesson you reach immediately is usually not the most useful one. “I should have researched more” or “I moved too quickly” may be accurate - but they are rarely specific enough to produce real change. The more valuable lesson is often a pattern: something about how you usually think, what you often give too little weight to, or where you usually place your trust. The questions below help you find it.

Q1 What did I assume without checking?

List the assumptions - then ask: is this typical? Do I make this kind of assumption regularly?

Q2 What did I notice but not act on?

A signal, a doubt, a piece of information you registered but set aside. What stopped you acting on it?

Q3 Who or what did I over-rely on?

A single source of advice, a familiar approach, a trusted person. Is this a recurring pattern across other decisions?

Q4 What would I have needed to know to decide differently - and could I have known it?

If you could have known it, why didn't you find it? If you couldn't have known it, this points to a learning experience rather than a mistake.

Q5 Does this lesson appear elsewhere?

Look across other significant decisions you have made or reviewed. Is the same pattern present? If so, describe it.

Q6 Did it go the way my Step 5 risk assessment expected?

Did a risk you had identified happen, one you had not identified, or did the difference come from somewhere else? Check what you wrote in Step 5.

The non-obvious lesson in one sentence

Try to state a pattern, not just an event

PART 3 Have you got the right lesson?

The most common error in reviewing decisions is attributing outcomes to the wrong cause. A good outcome from a poor process is not a vindication. A bad outcome from a sound process is not a condemnation. Two tests help you check whether the lesson you have drawn is the right one.

TEST A - THE PROCESS TEST

Ask: Would I make the same decision again with the same information available at the time?

If YES and the outcome was bad: the lesson is about the limits of what was knowable at the time, not a flaw in your process. Be careful not to revise your past self's reasoning using information that only became available later.

If NO: you have identified a process issue. Describe it specifically below. Vague lessons ("be more careful") are not actionable. Specific ones ("check whether the person advising me has direct experience") are.

Your answer and explanation

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TEST B - THE LUCK TEST

Ask: Could the same process have produced a different outcome under different circumstances?

If YES: the outcome was not entirely within your control. This does not mean the result was random - it means you should not over-learn from this single instance. A good outcome does not confirm the process was sound. A bad outcome does not confirm it was flawed.

If NO: the outcome was closely tied to the process. The lesson you draw from the result is more reliable.

Your answer and explanation

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Conclusion: what does the right lesson say?

After both tests, state the lesson you are confident in drawing

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CARRY FORWARD What you will do differently

Translate the lesson into a specific commitment. A general intention ("I will think more carefully") is unlikely to change anything. A specific commitment ("Before committing to a timeline, I will ask one person who has done this before to review it") has a much higher chance of sticking.

Specific commitment	When / in what situations

The pattern I am trying to break or build <i>In one sentence</i>	
What I will watch for in later decisions	
When I will check whether this commitment is holding <i>Set a specific date or trigger</i>	

Use this tool alongside the Learning Log and After-Action Review. Review completed tools periodically - the patterns across multiple reviews are more informative than any single one.

Sources and references

DECISION-MAKING AND OUTCOME EVALUATION

Duke, A. (2018). Thinking in bets: Making smarter decisions when you don't have all the facts. Portfolio/Penguin.

Provides the core distinction between decision quality and outcome quality - a sound process can produce a bad outcome, and a poor process can produce a good one. This distinction underpins Part 1 (Mistake or learning experience?) and Part 3 (The luck test).

Baron, J., & Hershey, J. C. (1988). Outcome bias in decision evaluation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(4), 569-579.

Original research on outcome bias - the tendency to judge the quality of a decision by its result rather than by the quality of the process used to reach it. Informs Part 3 of this tool.

Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, fast and slow. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Covers hindsight bias and the distortions that affect retrospective evaluation of decisions. Relevant to the caution in Part 3 against using information unavailable at decision time to judge the decision.

AFTER-ACTION REVIEW METHODOLOGY

United States Army. (1993). A leader's guide to after-action reviews (TC 25-20). Department of the Army.

The foundational document for the after-action review process. The structured review approach in this tool and in the companion Learning Log and After-Action Review draws on this methodology, adapted for individual use.