

# Learning the lesson of an intelligence failure?

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## Resumé

Denna essä tar utgångspunkt inom teoribildningen rörande "Intelligence Failure" och hävdar att det går att fastställa om en organisation har "lärt av sina misstag" utifrån tre undersökande perspektiv. Först kan man undersöka organisationens erfarenhetshandling, vilket ger underlag av formell karaktär. Här lyfts exempel från Försvarsmaktens erfarenhetshandling fram. Därefter kan man undersöka organisationens reformering utifrån olika utkast om "Intelligence Failure" exemplifierade av Zegart, Betts och Bar-Joseph & Kruglanski. Slutligen kan man undersöka organisationens prestationer över tiden och därigenom få underlag om effekten av lärandet. Det finns dock flera historiografiska utmaningar med att dra slutsatser utifrån fallstudier och varje perspektiv ovan bidrar helt eller delvis med underlag, beroende på det särskilda fallet. I kombination formar de emellertid ett stabilt ramverk för undersökningar som kan påvisa om en organisation "lärt av sina misstag".

THIS ESSAY<sup>1</sup> ARGUES that we can tell if an organisation has "learned from failure" and introduces three different approaches that each provide evidence ranging from origin to effect. First, examine the organisation's internal lessons learned process, which presents evidence of formal character. Second, use the "intelligence failure"<sup>2</sup> concept to examine organisational reform and change itself, which provides evidence of origin. Last, examine the organisation's performance over time, which gives evidence of learning effect.

A "Lesson Learned" is when related action is taken and/or the learning is institutionalised.<sup>3</sup> However, attributing a "learning" solely to "failure" is contestable, because successes and best practises as well as the opponents' actions also lay ground for improvement. Each approach may therefore provide full or partial evidence depending on the case. But, if the "lesson learned" is visible in all three approaches, there is a

solid argument that the organisation has "learned from failure".

The first approach is examination of the internal lessons learned process. This approach is exemplified by Swedish Armed Forces procedures, which emanates from a practitioner perspective and may need adjustment to other contexts. However, the ideas behind the machinery are based on generic process management and with respect to NATO interoperability, making the approach fairly generic.<sup>4</sup> The phases of the process are planning, collection, analysis and implementation, and all data are systematically stored in databases. This examination can track where a specific learning comes from.<sup>5</sup> If the "lessons from failure" appear as implemented in the internal lessons learned process, they are formally established.<sup>6</sup> This approach brings formal strength to the findings, but the organisation may learn without

a formalised process. Other approaches are needed to find such evidence.

The second approach uses the “Intelligence Failure” concept, which can be examined by perspectives ranging from organisational and human factors to policymakers' mistakes. Each perspective generates its lessons learned. Consequently, using those perspectives the other way around to examine organisational reform may reveal if relevant “lessons learned” have been implemented. One perspective focuses on analysis or policy-maker side, exemplified by Betts view that failures “have seldom been made by collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by the decision maker”.<sup>7</sup>

If examination of reform shows implemented examples like improved checklists, better training of analysts or better policymaker direction and expectations, these are signs of lessons learned.<sup>8</sup> Another perspective is that human factors caused failure, like cognitive bias and similar hazards.<sup>9</sup> Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski also proposes tailored personality tests as one mean of mitigation.<sup>10</sup> If the examination shows for example improved cognitive training, tests and use of mitigating analytical toolsets, these are evidence of lessons learned here. Zegart presents yet another perspective that relates failure to organisational structures, culture and misleading incentives.<sup>11</sup> Managerial and organisational reform that provides examples like “better intelligence co-operation and sharing, job rotation between agencies” or new incentives programs can indicate lessons learned in this perspective and provide evidence accordingly.<sup>12</sup> Zegart's findings that prior to 9/11, only 35 of the 340 recommendations for changes in the

intelligence community were implemented, also bear evidence of the extent of learning.<sup>13</sup>

There is a logical consistency in using similar perspectives to identify lessons learned and to examine their implementation. It does not exclude that other factors influenced reform, though. Likewise, the different perspectives do not discriminate their recommendations fully. However, the findings are good enough to indicate if lessons from failure are learned by the organisation.

The third approach engages with “studying the performance over time, focusing on learning curves of military organizations”, as presented by Pöhlmann.<sup>14</sup> Evidence like “the successful integration of signals intelligence into a new, multisource intelligence picture” from his study on German WWI Intelligence can exemplify this.<sup>15</sup> Looking at facts like structure, size, manpower and procedures and examining the improvement over time can bring evidence of “learning lessons” from intelligence failure.<sup>16</sup> Results like Gentry's concerning the ODNI where “its beneficial influence on analysis has been minimal”, present learning evidence.<sup>17</sup> This approach consequently also illustrates the effects of the learning, or even the lack of such.

There are problems with learning from failure, which indirectly pose problems when examining the lessons learned. Likewise, as in history, we should consider multiple causes related to one outcome.<sup>18</sup> Intelligence organisations also face a constant struggle against “outside enemies”.<sup>19</sup> Those enemies bring reciprocal interaction including deception, which complicates the search for causation and to what organisational change should be attributed.<sup>20</sup> Also, by focusing on failure we may lose sight of the successes, best practice and related learning.<sup>21</sup> Further, the classification of the material makes research

challenging and even if intelligence organisations are proven to learn, a "batting average" of past assessments is difficult to establish.<sup>22</sup> All this must be appreciated while examining if "lessons from failure" are learned.

The three approaches mitigate challenges in different ways. The first approach is fairly resistant to most challenges, maybe apart from deception and the problem of classification, and it also captures successes and best practice. The strength of the second approach is the focus on failure and the range of evidence from organisational, psychological or analytical/policy-maker origin, indicating causation. The third approach is not primarily focused on failure or causation but presents evidence of learning effect and the "batting average". If approaches are combined, that mitigates most challenges including problems of causation.

In conclusion, there are clear challenges in telling whether an organisation has "learned from failure", for other reasons, or even at all. However, it is possible to examine and the three different approaches in this essay can provide useful evidence. The first one may formally distinguish the lesson learned, while the others provide evidence of the origin of the lessons, and the learning effect, respectively. They all in different ways mitigate the challenges of learning from failure. In combination, they offer a framework that will show solid evidence if an organisation has learned its lesson from failure.

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## Notes

1. This piece was written during the course module “Intelligence History - Failure and Successes” within the framework of the Master in Intelligence and Security Studies (MAISS) at Brunel University in Great Britain, Spring 2019.
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4. *Handbok Erfarenhetshantering 2017 (Lessons Learned Handbook*, my translation), Försvarsmakten, FM2017-12638:2 (with references to; Carlson and Norén: *Metoder för erfarenhetshantering - en översikt*, FOI Memo 4517 (2013), *NATO Lessons Learned Handbook*, and *NATO Joint Analysis Handbook*.)
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22 and 26.
6. *Ibid.*
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11. Zegart, Amy B.: *Spying Blind*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2007, p. 63.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
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15. *Ibid.*, p 53.
16. *Ibid.*, p 54; Gentry John A.: “Has the ODNI Improved U.S. Intelligence Analysis?”, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 28:4, 2015, p. 638.
17. *Ibid.*, Gentry, John A., p. 654.
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21. Dahl, Eric J.: *Intelligence and Surprise Attack*, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC 2013, p. 3.
22. *Op. cit.*, Hollister Headley, John, see note 2, pp. 437-38.