

Policy Brief

Learning to Counter Terrorism

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“In a world defined by increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity, we must urgently re-examine and reimagine how knowledge and learning can best contribute to the global common good..”

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020
Humanistic futures of learning: Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks, p.11

Executive summary

The process of learning lessons from terrorist attacks and scenario-based exercises plays a pivotal role in strengthening preparedness for responding to, and recovering from, terrorist attacks. This paper provides leaders, policymakers and practitioners with insights and recommendations that can support organisations and cities to Empower, Extract, Embed, Exchange and Evaluate that learning.

Introduction

Individuals and groups who plan and prepare to commit, or threaten to commit, acts of terrorism are *always* learning. They learn how to exploit vulnerabilities, acquire and/or build weapons, strategically disrupt systems, hide intentions and conceal identities. They also learn how to evade detection, sometimes for long enough to execute catastrophic acts of tactical violence that can impact upon lives and cities to achieve their political, religious, racial or ideological objectives.

Learning how to increasingly and effectively counter terrorism is even more critical. The ‘lessons learned’ process, which identifies and implements lessons from exercises and incidents to advance the prevention of, and preparedness for future attacks, demonstrates the power of learning as a countermeasure. Yet the process of embedding lessons to inform updated thinking, planning and performance can be complex in practice. The key is to understand how leaders and policy makers can ensure that the strategic learning advantage is firmly and reliably leveraged in favour of those working to safeguard, rather than sabotage, our cities, then effectively implement this in practice.

CTPN’s Strategic Coordination report impressed the need for the evolving threat of international terrorism to be met with evolving countermeasures. This brief proposes that lessons learned processes should also evolve, adapting to become increasingly effective at achieving measurable learning outcomes within and across cities. It draws on a recent report from the UK’s National Preparedness Commission entitled, *‘Learning that can save lives’*, to demonstrate how psychological perspectives can be applied to inform positive adaptations in city-wide learning. In line with the aims of CTPN’s lessons and implementation board, ten policy recommendations are offered to help cities Empower, Extract, Exchange, Embed and Evaluate learning from terrorist attacks.

Learning that can save lives

The lessons learned process provides individuals, institutions and a range of multi-agency stakeholders with an opportunity to reflect on key learning from a simulated or real attack. These lessons can be used to direct positive actions and adaptations that improve future preparedness and strengthen resilience. But despite the ubiquitous nature of learning, this process can be subject to a range of complex environmental and performance influencing factors that impact the ability of stakeholders

to effectively embed lessons and achieve change. In some cases, this can mean that lessons are not *'learnt to the extent that there is sufficient change in policy and practice to prevent their repetition'*. This can result in the recurrence of past mistakes, the re-surfacing of issues presumed resolved and the unintentional tolerance of latent vulnerabilities at all stages of the emergency management cycle.

The 'Learning that can save lives' report adopts the position that apparent 'failures to learn' are indicative of problems with the structures, processes and practices that enable people and organisations to learn, rather than the absence of learning per se. Research from the US and UK attributes these problems, at least in part, to a *'lack of formal, rigorous and systematic methodology for learning and understanding how people learn and retain information'* and a *'failure to break the process down into component parts'*. In direct response, the report draws on a rich body of academic research to highlight mechanisms that underpin individual-level learning, and some of the psychosocial processes involved when scaling that learning within and across organisations.

It also breaks the lessons learned process down into component parts (see infographic at the end of this brief). These include four broad areas of potential failure that lead may lead to insufficient or absent learning, eleven active learning process stages and six psychological aspects that can positively or negatively influence individual and organisational learning. These are referred to as the 'Six M's': Management (including Leadership); Mindset; Motivation; Methods; Memory and Measurement. This policy brief demonstrates how these Six M's can enable agencies within and across cities to Empower, Extract, Embed, Exchange and Evaluate learning in a counter terrorism context.

EMPOWER: Management

The ability to achieve individual, organisational and multi-agency learning is significantly influenced by the behaviour of leaders and inextricably linked to realising a vision for an adaptive, resilient city. This was highlighted in the preliminary 22nd July Commission report following the terrorist attacks on Utøya Island, Norway, which observed that lessons learned were *'...to a greater extent applicable to leadership, interaction, culture and attitudes, than to a lack of resources, a need for new legislation, organisation or important value choices'*.

Leaders, policymakers and public sector managers must therefore *'lead to learn'* in thought and action, working to ensure an enabling institutional environment that empowers their 'learners' to achieve desired changes following attacks. City-wide commitments for robust governance and accountability that provides meaningful learning frameworks and supports a continual lesson-learning cycle should flow from the top down. This creates a meaningful, psychosocial structure for change that empowers and promotes considered, consistent, city-wide learning. These commitments should be embedded in counterterrorism narratives and strategic directives that:

1. Communicate and promote the primacy of positive, committed *attitudes* towards learning that empower adaptations from the top-down and inform a positive, city-wide, learning culture.
2. Establish well resourced, inclusive frameworks for city-wide learning that are informed by *interaction* with frontline practitioners and *integrate* academic concepts. This inclusive approach can be used to guide the meaningful design and specification of learning work prescribed in policy and outworked in practice.

EXTRACT: Mindset

The report published by the London Assembly following the 7/7 London bombings, the Harvard analysis of lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombing and the Royal Commission Inquiry of the

Terrorist Attack on the Christchurch Mosques all refer to issues of '*mindset*' in relation to the preparation for and response to major terrorist attacks. This inherently psychological aspect is especially relevant in the context of extracting lessons.

Mindset refers to a set of *internal* beliefs that influence the way people think, feel and behave. Research demonstrates that mindsets are significant predictors in the achievement of successful learning outcomes. Individuals and institutions with '*fixed*' mindsets may be closed to the idea of growth and/or change. This may be evidenced in a greater commitment to apportioning blame than driving positive hazard adaptations and can manifest in an implicit bias towards the identification of 'cosmetic' lessons, tick-box changes and vertical, silo-working. This can lead to the isolation of key learning within single departments or agencies, leaving root cause issues unaddressed.

Conversely, a '*growth*' mindset demonstrates an openness to learn, a willingness to change, and can be a more powerful motivator and determinant of learning outcomes than IQ scores. This kind of mindset avoids negative cycles of blame in favour of future-focussed thinking and strategic lesson selection, based on the severity and impact of the lesson *not* being learnt, rather than the speed at which it can be addressed. To support a city-level 'growth mindset' policymakers can:

3. Review debriefing policy and practice guidance to ensure it is psychologically informed and fit for purpose in terms of directing both vertical (intra-agency), *and* horizontal (inter-agency) identification and extraction of the *right*, root-cause lessons.
4. Foster growth through the invitation of diverse, critical perspectives into debriefing processes that can challenge parochial practice and mindsets, provide independent reflection and motivate future-focused perspectives.

EXCHANGE: Methods

The importance and practice of sharing lessons identified from major terrorist incidents is widely established. But despite the regular exchange of lessons via reports, learning logs and online databases, there appears to be a striking similarity in lessons identified following terrorist attacks.

A key challenge is that uploaded lessons may represent '*learnt knowledge*' (i.e. information in context) in one city but represent *information* in the next. To support the efficacy of the exchange and help draw lessons identified from 'cloud to ground', contextualised, place-based, meaning must be reassigned to shared lessons. To support this, research suggests that informal lesson exchange done in connection and conversation with others across agencies may be more effective than online reporting systems alone. This is because the relational context generates richer, social information (e.g. environment, emotions etc.) that can help to strengthen neural connections associated with the lesson and learning across brain regions. This does not mean that shared lesson logs are not valuable, but it highlights the importance of balancing online and in person opportunities to exchange lessons. This kind of informal lesson sharing carries further value in terms of its i) potential to increase a shared understanding of partner agency procedures and operational priorities and ii) to strengthen inter-agency relationships, which speak to recommendations in the Kerslake Report following the 2017 Manchester Arena Attack. To support lesson exchange policymakers and practitioners should:

5. Recognise the benefits and limitations of technology. Online lesson stores should be balanced with opportunities for in-person exchanges, allowing lessons to be stored and *storied* across key stakeholders. As approximately 80% of workplace learning is informal, doing so is likely to improve learning outcomes.

6. Cities should openly and actively contextualise lessons identified across boundaries and borders, considering associated local impacts and exploring related ‘*what if...?*’ scenarios.

EMBED: Memory

In the London Assembly report following the 7/7 London bombings, the ‘overarching fundamental lesson’ was said to be the need for a ‘...*necessary shift in focus from incidents to individuals, and from processes to people*’. The same shift is still required in the lessons learned context.

The person is the starting point for learning. At an individual, neuropsychological, level learning involves the restructuring of neural circuits in the brain in response to new and/or updated information. Therefore, the adaptive nature of embodied human learning remains one of the ‘*few means by which the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world can be met*’.

To maximise human learning in both informal and formal learning contexts, the development of individual, organisational and multi-agency memory is key. Memory can be enhanced by employing learning techniques in training that anchor new learning in existing knowledge, embed stories of lived experience in delivery, and are mindful of individual processing capacity. Neural circuits that underpin the knowledge and skills required for a fluent emergency response can also be strengthened through their repeated requirements to recall and rehearse them during training exercises. Exercises and scenarios that require cooperation and collaboration across city stakeholders can also promote multi-agency memory. These benefits were highlighted by responders involved in the attacks at Westminster Bridge and the Manchester Arena, who commonly cited the *recency* of emergency preparedness exercises held shortly before the attacks as ‘*an important facilitating factor...*’ in the improved coordination, adherence to plans and confidence in roles during the respective responses. To build memory at individual and agency levels, lead practitioners should:

7. Commit to evidence-based tools and techniques in training to help learning ‘stick’.
8. Ensure scenario-based exercises are delivered at regularly spaced intervals on-line and in-person. They should promote collaboration, favour frequency over immersion and consistently marry learning concepts with practice to maximise memory retention.

EVALUATE: Measurement

The *imperative* to ‘learn the lessons’ must be explicit in policy, but the impact of lesson implementation should be subject to regular monitoring, evaluation and a level of accountability to ensure the *integrity* of learning in practice. The ability to track progress is critical for any change programme and a core characteristic of well developed, learning organisations. The absence of coordinated, consistent, assessments of outcomes or the application of subjective learning measures in lieu of objective indicators, can lead to false assumptions about the success of implementation.

Assigning proportionate accountability for lesson implementation and defining aims, outcomes and indicators of learning in relation to identified lessons can help to break desired changes down into manageable, measurable goals. It also provides a mechanism for productive feedback, and can spur motivation when innovative, iterative improvements in policy and practice are taking time to diffuse across stakeholders and cities. To support monitoring and evaluation policymakers should:

9. Define roles, responsibilities and proportionate accountability for those driving change in each of the eleven lessons learned process aspects (see infographic at the end of this brief). This

will support distributed ownership of associated goals and ensure that the variety of skills required to realise learning progress are in place.

10. Set a robust monitoring and evaluation framework that sits within wider, strategic, city-level learning policy. This should be employed to track objective learning progress consistently and methodically against identified learning outcomes across agencies.

Conclusion

In the face of an evolving terrorist threat, the lessons learned process should also evolve to ensure a strategic learning advantage for those working to counter it. To Empower, Extract, Embed, Exchange and Evaluate learning, leaders and policymakers should 'lead to learn' at all stages of the lessons learned cycle. This involves re-examining and re-imagining how professional practice and academic insights can maximise city-wide preparedness. By promoting a positive learning culture, developing person-centred policy and embedding scientifically informed learning practices, cities can co-create increasingly effective, multi-agency learning frameworks that build resilience against terrorism.

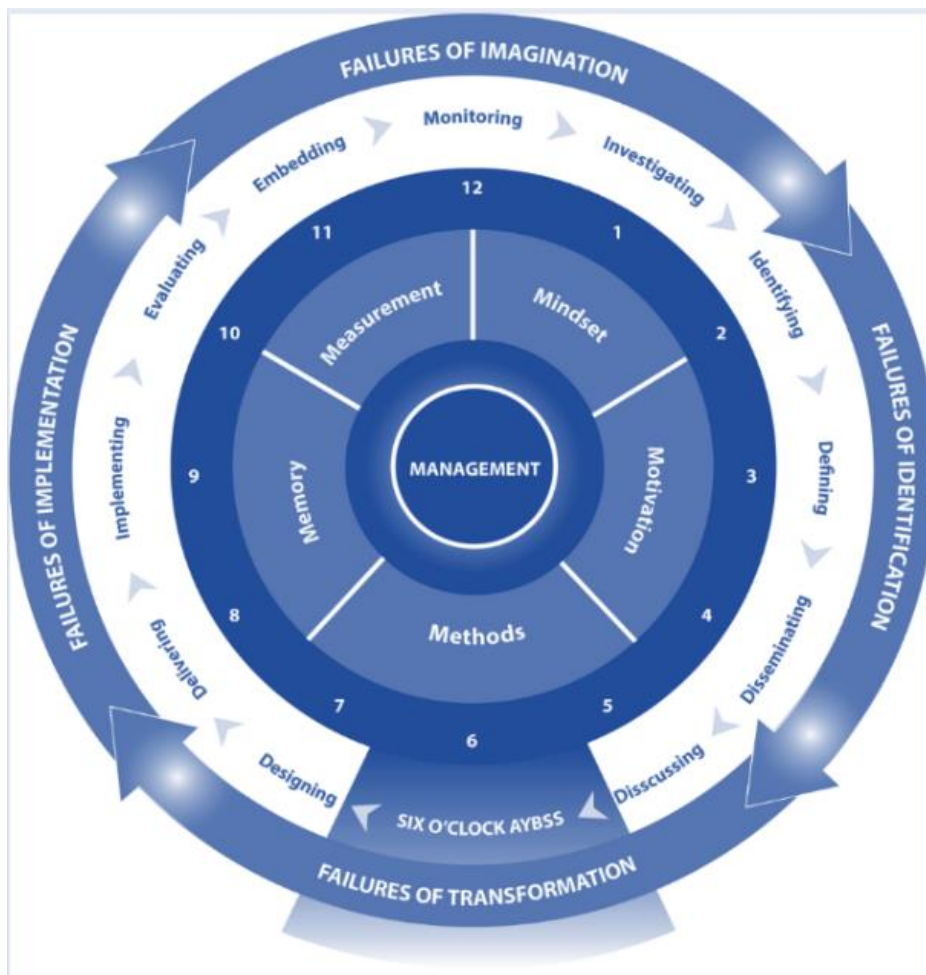


Figure 1: The Lessons Learned Cycle, Roast, 2021.

Credit: Policy brief written for CTPN by Lianna Roast, Member of the CTPN Lessons and Implementation Board and Associate Researcher at Bournemouth University Disaster Management Centre. A full reference list is available upon request via ctpn@london-fire.gov.uk.