



# Learning Lessons Today: Adapting Agile Methodology to Lessons Learned

## Learning Lessons and Agile Improvement Over Lessons Learned

There's a recurring problem with Lessons Learned: We don't actually use them.

We invest a lot in lessons learned, assembling small armies of people to gather data, consolidate the lessons learned, and store them away where people can consult them when some future crisis emerges. Maybe.

But the playbook of lessons learned from past events is often irrelevant. To be relevant, we need a different approach that produces results faster. We need to be agile.

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## Embracing Agile

Agile embraces failing fast and running with the minimum of viable products in order to shorten delivery timelines. Agile also puts simplicity on a pedestal: according to the Agile Manifesto, "the art of maximizing the amount of work *not* done...is essential." Although indigenous to software development, agility is useful outside of its native environment.

Traditionally, Lessons Learned have been dutifully collected during and in the wake of a crisis and disseminated after-the-fact for use in future crises. But what if we streamlined it and geared the effort toward the crisis we are living through? Leaders would have actionable information early on, be able to evaluate the effectiveness of corrective actions, and better position organizations to transform.

Guidehouse's National Security Segment in Denver is using an agile lessons "learning" approach to help organizations respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Lessons "Learning" from Denver

The Denver Guidehouse team is infusing agile principles into their Lessons Learned methodology, delivering clients lessons we are "learning" so they can act now. There are three key features to the delivery: a mixed-methods approach, iterative capture and analysis, and timely recommendations. The focus isn't on a final report — but the *continuous delivery of actionable recommendations*.

First, a **mixed-methods approach** allowed the team to discover unknown unknowns — uncovering problems and solutions that weren't expected. The Guidehouse team combined leadership interviews, workforce surveys, observation narratives, and chat-based focus groups to learn lessons from multiple perspectives. The leadership interviews provided insight into key decisions and leadership challenges that we were able to address with quantitative results from the workforce survey and qualitative responses to focus group questions. This allowed for agility in survey design, adding questions linked to upcoming leadership decisions. Similarly, workforce surveys and focus group chats also generated unexpected solutions, allowing the team to propose recommendations scalable to other organizations.

Pairing structured and unstructured capture across all levels of the organization vastly increased Guidehouse's visibility into challenges and victories as they were happening. It also helped the team avoid confirmation bias and allowed them to engage in divergent thought to explore competing hypotheses.

Second, **iterative lessons capture** and analysis were critical to generating "in-flight" lessons that could be used immediately. The Guidehouse team used a multi-phase approach, capturing information and providing recommendations in early and mid-crisis phases. An iterative, phase-linked approach allowed the team to adjust capture instruments to meet emerging decisions and to gauge the effectiveness of interim actions. An iterative approach also supports longitudinal analysis, allowing the team to compare results from multiple phases and show changes over time.

Finally, **timely recommendations** are key to providing lessons "learning" instead of lessons "learned." The Guidehouse team used a minimum viable product approach to provide recommendations early and often to leaders, emphasizing speed rather than completeness. This approach also allowed the team to focus energy on recommendations most likely to be adopted rather than mature "nonstarter" recommendations.



## Conclusion

Leaders need the ability to make informed decisions during, rather than after, a crisis. Changing from Lessons Learned to Lessons Learning, featuring mixed-methods capture, iterative lessons, and timely recommendations, provides leaders with actionable insights when they need them. This agile take on the traditional approach puts lessons in the hands of leaders at more meaningful junctures and allows them to gauge the success of interim practices. It also encourages conscious evolution rather than forced adaptation, positioning leaders to proactively drive toward their desired end-state.