

2022 Lessons Management Forum: when observations become lessons learnt

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The 2022 Lessons Management Forum brought people together in-person for the first time since 2019 by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and AFAC and explored the theme ‘What does success look like?’

In March 2022, delegates gathered in Brisbane and online to hear leading lessons management practitioners unpack the latest research and case studies. Attendees sought to answer the question of how best to ensure that the observations gained in reviews, inquiries and royal commissions are transformed into lessons learnt. During the 2 days of the forum, it emerged that a key element of successful lessons management is creating a learning culture.

In his opening address, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services Deputy Commissioner, Mike Wassing, remarked on the importance of taking advantage of the opportunity to learn and grow from the challenges we face.

‘Taking challenges and opportunities and turning them into lessons is one way we can share and support each other. We can create growth within ourselves, our respective organisations and with our communities’, he said.

Deputy Commissioner Wassing also highlighted the complexities of managing lessons.

‘It’s one thing to identify lessons from a past event or program, but taking these lessons and putting them into action to address identified issues as well as creating an improved outcome in the form of public value, community resilience or reduction in risk, requires a lot more consideration’, he said.

This sentiment was echoed by Queensland Inspector-General Emergency Management, Alistair Dawson, who spoke about moving on from identifying lessons to learning lessons.

‘The information is all there. There is nothing new. However, it is taking the action and sustaining it

through to completion where the complexity may lie’, he said.

Mark Jones, former South Australia Country Fire Service Chief Officer advocated for embracing frank and fearless lessons in his reflections on releasing the Kangaroo Island bushfire review led by C3 Resilience.

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‘There’s no point commissioning reviews, audits, staff surveys, cultural surveys, unless you know what you’ll do with them, whatever they find. And what would it say of me—who’s hoping to preside over a learning organisation—if I in any way try to alter the findings or hide the conclusions. What sort of learning organisation would we be then?’, he said.

The importance of true community engagement was another topic raised by presenters. Kylie Mercer from the Queensland Office of the Inspector-General of Emergency Management reflected on engaging with Traditional Owners during the K’gari (Fraser Island) Bushfire Review. She explained the need to take a community-centred approach to incident reviews.



QFES Deputy Commissioner, Mike Wassing made the forum opening address.

Image: AFAC

‘Learning with the Butchella people helped us better understand First Nations people’s knowledge about fire management and protection of cultural assets. It also helped us to understand that early engagement planning provides better results for First Nations communities if it is co-designed and co-delivered’, she said.

Dan Meijer and Josh Atkins from NSW Rural Fire Service spoke of the need to engage with your own workforce to create a learning culture.

‘When implementing our new lessons management system, the key point with convincing volunteers to get on board was to have face time with them. You can’t send a memo out from head office... you must have the workforce engagement’, he said.

Trust is a key part of this, Josh Atkins said, ‘...people needed to trust me that I trusted in them that it wasn’t personal. It was about all the things around them that supported them to make either a decision or not make a decision, to help them get better or help improve those systems so next time the person who is in that same position can make a better decision, or not’.

AFAC Lessons Management Award

The 2022 AFAC Lessons Management Award that acknowledges excellence in lessons management practice was sponsored and presented by C3 Resilience.



Carla Bailey, C3 Resilience, presented Geoff Cooper, Army Knowledge Centre, with the 2022 AFAC Lessons Management Award.

Image: AFAC

Disaster Relief Australia (DRA) was highly commended for the development and delivery of their post-activity reviews. DRA conducts these reviews after each operation to check they are providing meaningful outcomes for its stakeholders, including community, council, donors, volunteers and affiliated non-government organisations. The review process provides a critical analysis of the operation and captures metrics, operational appraisal, stakeholder feedback and improvement actions.

The winner of the 2022 AFAC Lessons Management Award was the Department of Defence for the COVID-19 Taskforce. This taskforce was established to coordinate the department’s support to whole-of-government efforts, including government agencies and international partners. To provide effective lessons management, a Defence COVID-19 Lessons Framework (DCLF) was established for the operation. One month after the DCLF was created, the number of observations submitted went from 3 to 125 and culminated in over 1,000 observations by the end of 2020. The DCLF worked on a principle of centralised coordination and de-centralised lessons collection and analysis performed by subject-matter experts. The DCLF was an innovative approach to facilitate lessons management throughout Defence.

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