

BREAKING BARRIERS: BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

An ECD intervention

SHARING LESSONS LEARNED



This Learning Brief is part of the
Ntataise Learning Lessons Series.
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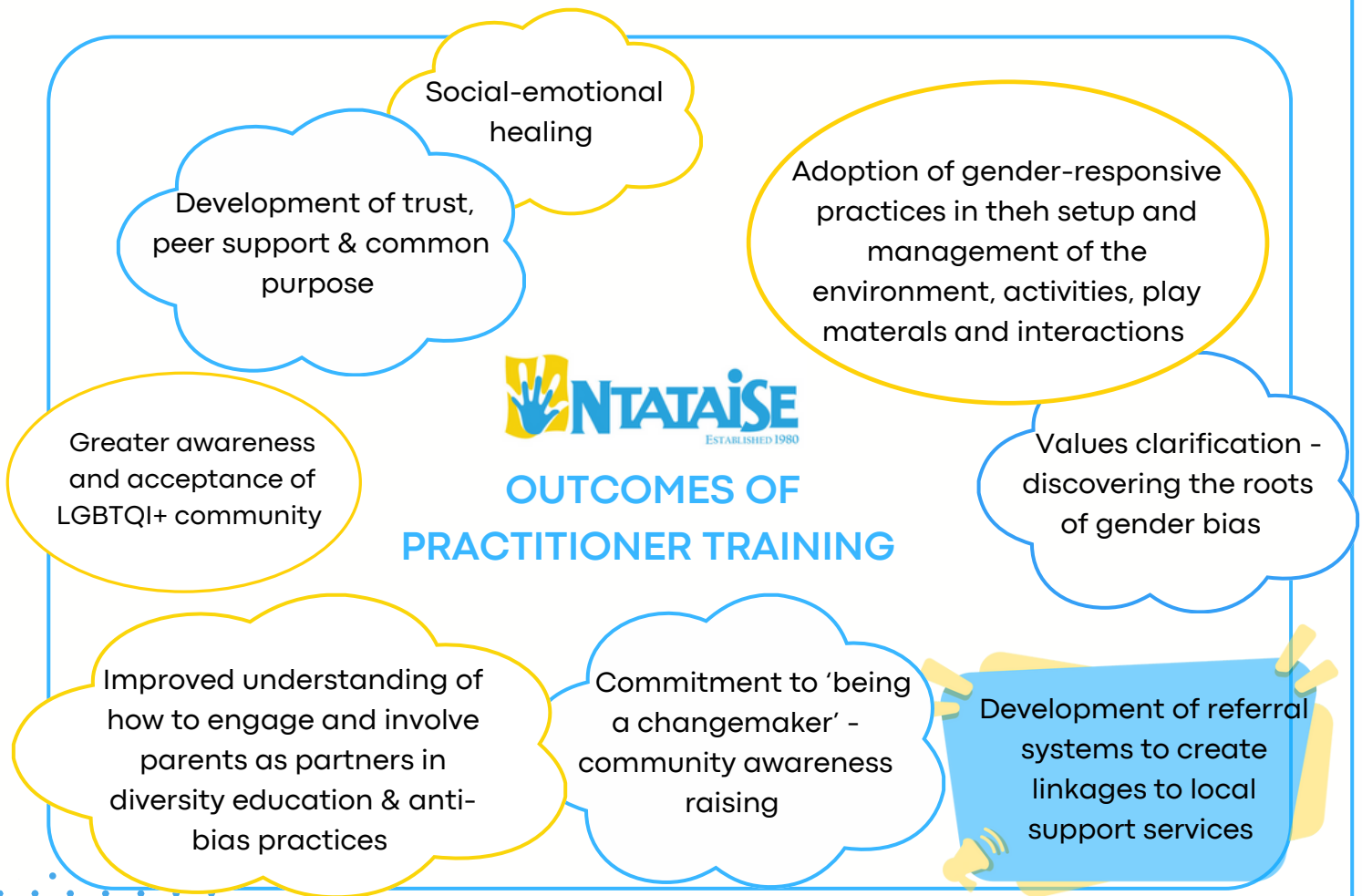
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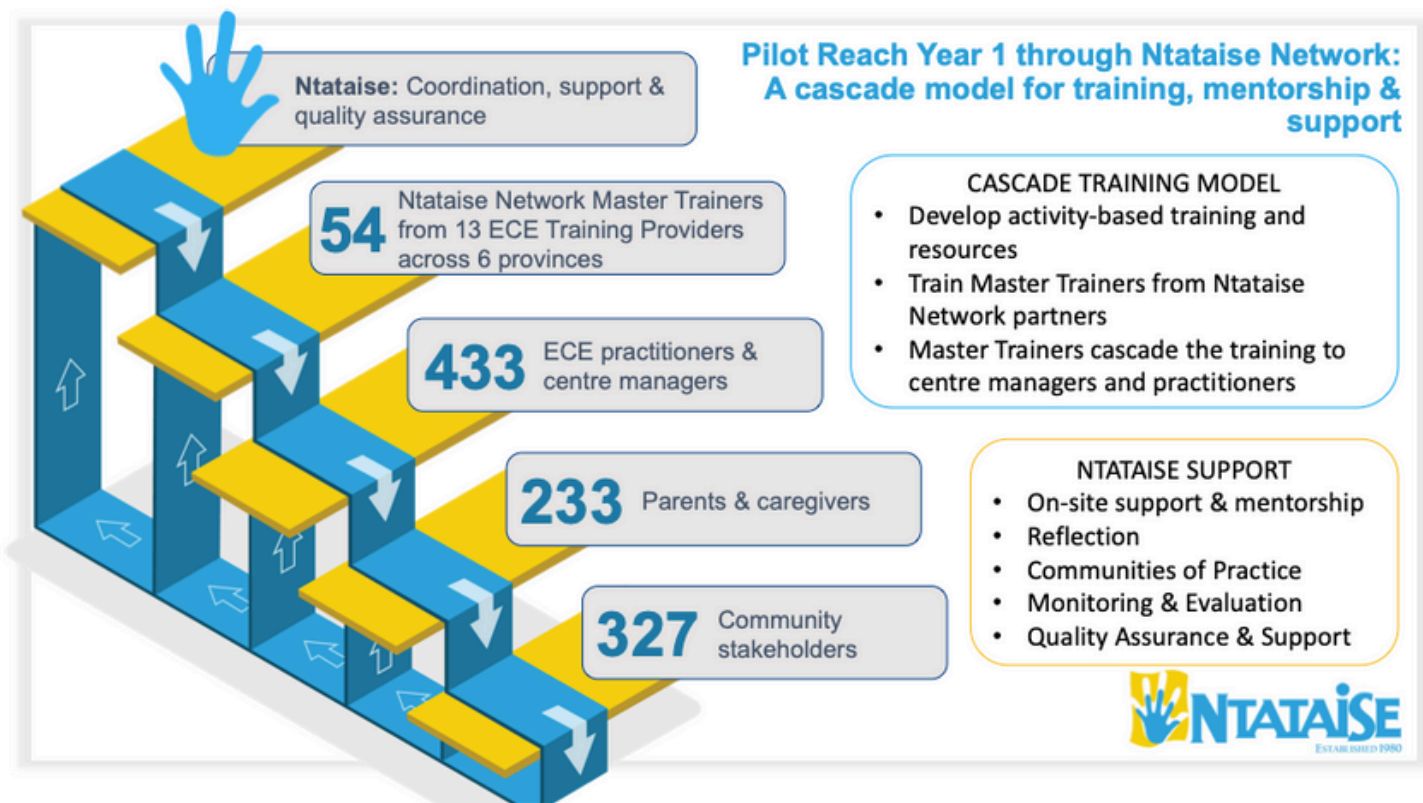
1. Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa affects hundreds of thousands of women and girls annually, with gender inequalities and stereotypes contributing to the issue. These factors make it difficult for victims to seek help, reinforcing harmful discrimination.

During the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, GBV increased due to a number of issues, including assumptions around gender roles. In response, the Solidarity Fund awarded Ntataise a grant in 2021 to create a training module which recognised the role of early childhood development (ECD) in shaping lifelong attitudes. This initiative aimed to break the cycle of GBV by (i) intervening in the formative phase of the early years, socialising young children to grow up with positive and inclusive attitudes towards gender dynamics; and (ii) influencing the mindsets, attitudes and values about gender equality of adults working with young children and their parents.



Ntataise collaborated with members of the Ntataise Network to develop and pilot training materials and an implementation model to promote gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) in the ECD educator workforce. Two well-known experts in the ECD sector, Dr Joan van Niekerk (a child rights and child protection consultant), and Linda Biersteker (an ECD researcher and curriculum specialist) gave inputs into both the training model and the curriculum.



2. Aim of this Learning Brief

Since the 2021-22 pilot and its evaluation, Ntataise has integrated elements of the programme into its capacity-building efforts, while reflecting on its effectiveness. Ntataise Network members have adapted the materials for training and advocacy in various contexts, generating valuable insights. These were shared in early 2024 during a Reflection Workshop, aligning with Ntataise's collaborative approach.

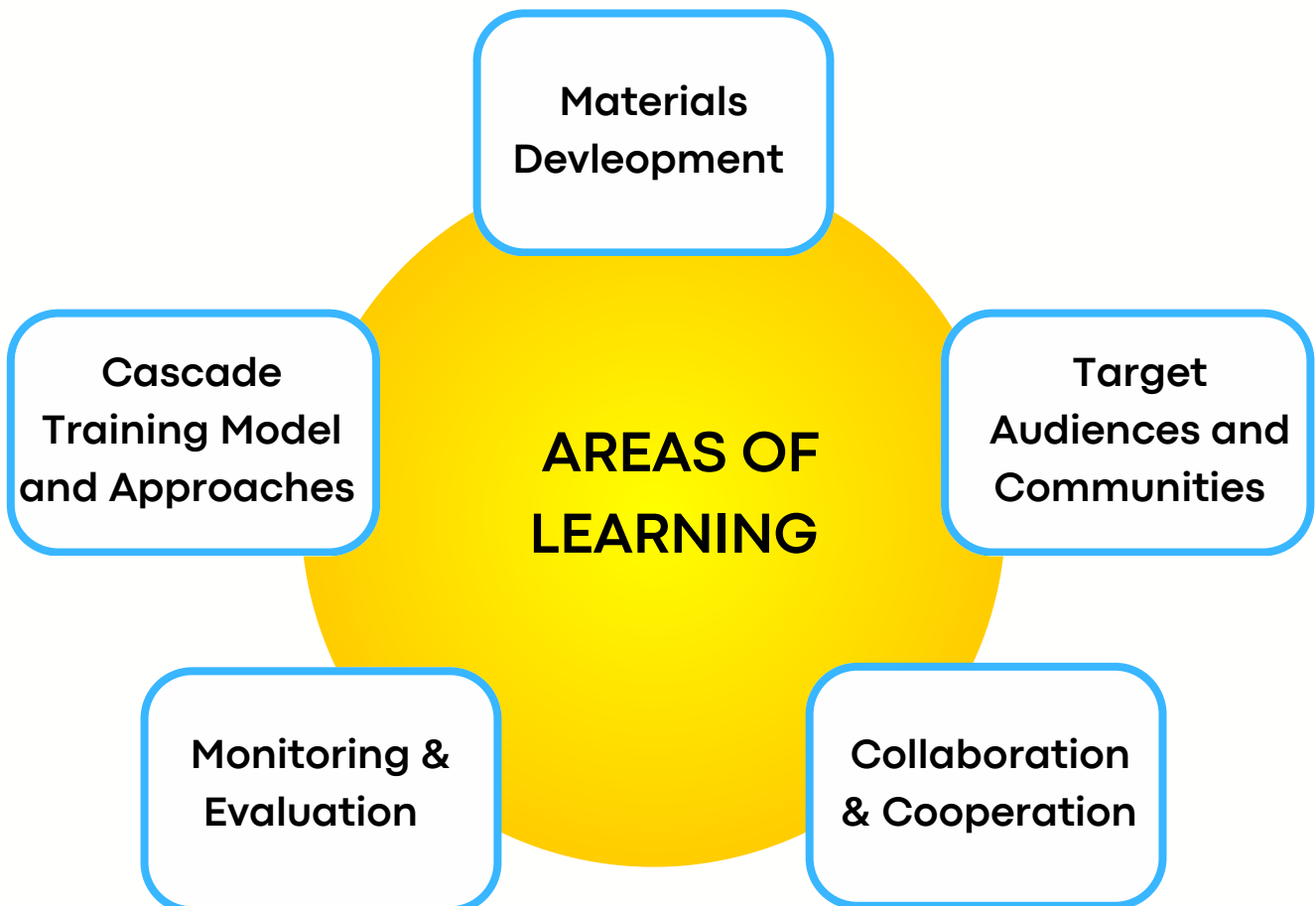
This Learning Brief summarises key lessons from the pilot and its evaluation, and the subsequent adaptations of the programme, to offer insights on implementing GBV-awareness and prevention in the ECD sector.



WE CAPTURE LESSONS LEARNED IN ORDER TO:

- Identify and record barriers to success and find ways of lessening their effects.
- Identify successes and good practices to inform subsequent implementation.
- Improve the implementation of the programme. Review and adapt the materials.
- Contribute to research on the topic.
- Contribute to the sector and to future interventions of this kind by passing on knowledge and sharing insights.

3. Lessons Learned





MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

- Given the prevalence of GBV in South Africa, we need to recognise that many of the Master Trainers and ECD practitioners who deliver the content have themselves experienced various forms of GBV. A first principle, then, is to design materials that help people talk about GBV experiences, equity and equality issues in safe ways.
- A collaborative and co-design process works best to ensure that the materials are fit for purpose and adaptable across contexts. Materials comprise a trainer manual and a participant manual, designed with the cascade training model in mind. Once trained, practitioners use the participant manual and its resources to work with their children on gender-related issues. The development team included Ntataise, ECD curriculum development experts drawn from the Ntataise Network, and the two external experts noted above. Dr Joan van Niekerk shared her insights and facilitation skills as a professional psychologist/ social worker to help with creating a safe space for sensitive discussions.
- The development budget must accommodate a consultative design process which allows time for research, focus groups, and iterative writing. Materials were based on research into best practices, and insights from focus groups with Ntataise Network members to understand cultural perspectives on gender norms and GBV.
- Resources for mediating learning and discussion – for training the practitioners, and at the level of working with the children – include visual aids, stories, songs, verses and posters, as well as games and activities with resources such as LEGO blocks. The image of the tree with roots, trunk and branches as a prompt for understanding and talking about GBV was adopted and adapted in many ways. Positive feedback from the pilot and subsequent programmes highlights the need for diverse communication methods beyond verbal in GBV training.

CASCADE TRAINING MODEL AND APPROACHES

- The initial Master Trainer training cannot be rushed, but should give all involved an opportunity to confront their own biases and values. This helps clarify ways in which materials can be mediated and the training implemented with practitioners. As shown by the quotes below, self-reflection was a critical 'first step' in the Master Training experience.

I can see how unconsciously I was passing gender bias to my children. I now understand how to break the cycle.

The training was very enlightening, it enabled us to reflect on our experiences and to eliminate any type of behaviour or values that promote GBV in our homes and ECD centres.

I appreciate the opportunity for us to be ourselves and the affirmation that our experiences, knowledge and skills are valuable in bringing change to society. I became more aware of my personal life journey and accept it as a rich practical resource to share and use in my engagements with others. Thank you for taking us on such an amazing life changing experience - YES, WE CAN!

- A check-in process with Dr van Niekerk helped Master Trainers feel secure, and modelled ways in which they could then assist practitioners and any others they would be training later on. This ensures that good practices like self-reflection are sustained.
- An ongoing monitoring process and support system was developed so that Master Trainers can go on to deliver training to their own practitioners, in order to continue to gather feedback and insights for overall programme improvement.
- To engage practitioners in training on gender attitudes, it is essential to establish trust and create a safe, non-judgmental environment for open sharing. Confidentiality should be emphasized, with participants signing an agreement at the start of the programme. Trainers must be skilled in managing sensitive discussions and respecting diverse religious and cultural beliefs.

- The evaluation of the pilot showed the need for additional wrap-around support for trainees, such as:
 - Making sure that trainees understand the role of professional counselling, when and how to access this, and who needs it (for example, not only victims but also their family members and others who might be supporting them).
 - Providing information on the support services available, as many trainees noted that they and their communities often either don't know what is available, or don't understand the referral processes, or lack confidence in social services.

These insights suggest that implementation of GBV awareness and prevention programmes should take a coordinated approach between providers and local government and other community-based support services.

TARGET AUDIENCES AND COMMUNITIES

The Solidarity-funded training module led to the pilot programme described above. Since then, various organisations have expanded its reach to communities, parents, and caregivers, adapting materials for their own programmes and advocacy. This section shares lessons learned from these experiences.

- Discussions on gender can't be done in the abstract, as values and norms are deeply rooted in culture. Before starting advocacy or training at the community level, assess community readiness and determine the scope of gender discussions. The sector should also consider how to sensitively address LGBTQIA+ topics. While inclusive approaches can address stereotyping and gender norms, discussions on gender transition for children can be contentious due to cultural and religious beliefs. Inputs should be carefully planned based on stakeholder discussions to ensure community buy-in.

- Parents and caregivers are vital in shaping children's attitudes, behaviours and values from an early age. Children learn about gender roles and expectations from their families, communities, and media. Both male and female caregivers need to be supported in modelling and teaching gender equality to break down harmful stereotypes and promote healthy, respectful relationships. In discussions, some fathers recognised their role in perpetuating inequality and committed to fostering new awareness in their communities.
- Men and boys themselves can be victims of GBV, and need to be an integral part of any discussions on the topic.

Below are some examples of extensions to programme reach and adaptations that show what can be done, and the lessons learned from these innovations.

THUSANANG TRUST

After attending Master Trainer training, the Thusanang team used the materials to build a different approach with 31 practitioners, and with eight groups of 25 community members/ parents to participate in a three-day programme.

- Parents responded well to the inclusion of action planning at an individual level, and as a group to take advocacy and awareness forward.
- Specifically targeting fathers had a great impact, moving beyond talking towards breaking the cycle. Thusanang works closely with the Real Fathers Forum, who instituted various group initiatives at community level, including:

- Engaging with the tribal authority as custodians of culture to hold discussions on cultural norms and behaviours.
- Developing a campaign directed at young boys on Heritage Day, which included posters and sharing messages with cars and taxis during the 16 days of activism against GBV.
- Adding the fight against GBV as an ongoing and sustained role for the Real Fathers Forum. Forum members said that the training helped them with their own understanding. The personal story shared by an individual who was himself abused, and now continues to work in the Fathers Forum, was a key motivator and driver for action.
- Using the programme activities and materials with self-help groups can be learning events that lead to action.

GREATER SOWETO ASSOCIATION FOR ECD

This organisation intends to fuse elements of 'Breaking the Cycle of Gender-based Violence' with other programmes with similar aims, such as Heartline's 'Fathers Matter'; the A21 campaign that fights against human trafficking and other forms of exploitation; and the 'Steps to Staying Safe' storybooks.

Insights shared include:

- It is challenging to bring together these different programmes into one implementable approach, without overwhelming the target groups.
- We need to focus more on the prevention side by paying attention to empowering children to speak up and act in situations of abuse. It is often those in the 'safe circle' – that is, people the child knows – who perpetrate abuse. Pay attention to both external and internal threats to children, and make sure we give them a voice. Teaching children to act in their own defence should be strengthened in the 'Breaking the Cycle' programme.

One organisation which is outside the Ntataise Network has also used the programme. The Set Free Foundation is an anti-trafficking organisation registered in South Africa, the United Kingdom and Bulgaria. Research into GBV helps inform anti-trafficking strategies. The Set Free Foundation used the 'Breaking the cycle of gender-based violence' programme with a marginalised and poor Roma community in Bulgaria – a community in which one in four women and one in two children are victims of GBV. Some of the lessons shared from this experience include:

- While the curriculum needed to be contextualised for the culture, the activities and approach transferred easily. Appropriate translation into the different variants of the Roma language was a challenge.
- It took time to break down preconceived notions in relation to the shame of talking about GBV experiences, emphasizing that it is not demeaning to open up about these.
- The programme combined the play-based approach and LEGO-game therapy (based on the book by Alyson Thomsen called Thera-Build) to enable survivors to use inanimate objects to help them express their feelings and understanding within safe parameters. At the beginning of the sessions, personal sexual issues and gender identities were talked about with their eyes closed, but as more opportunities for open discussion and sharing were provided, there was more engagement.
- The societal norms in this community stress male superiority and rights, and men and boys needed to be brought into the conversations and be exposed to teaching opportunities.
- Community leaders found it eye-opening that GBV, violence as a means of oppression, and gender stereotypes are global issues and not confined to their communities.
- Various applications and adaptations of the programme are envisaged. It will be used to develop a trauma-informed response with first responders and war refugees from Ukraine, and in addition there are plans to develop a curriculum for men to counter trafficking.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

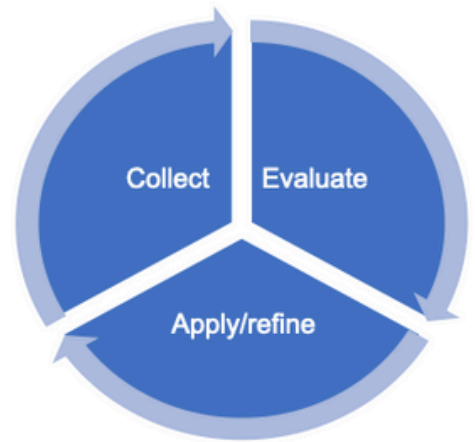
The internal M&E of the pilot programme was done to see what worked and what did not work, and to measure the achievement of the programme objectives. This data helped inform decisions on how the principles and approaches can be replicated, extended to different contexts, and scaled up.

Some key lessons learned about the M&E approach itself include:

- There are benefits to drawing on open education resource M&E tools, in order not to duplicate already existing work. With guidance from Linda Biersteker, Ntataise adapted the VVOB Pre- and Post tools (developed for VVOB's Gender Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education [GRP4ECE] programme) for assessing changes in trainers' and practitioners' knowledge and attitudes.
- Training the different Network partners who deliver the programme in different contexts to use the same M&E tools in the same ways is critical, so that data can be compared and consolidated.
- The facilitated debriefing sessions with trainers and practitioners provided qualitative data on the impact of the programme on both trainers' and practitioners' own attitudes to gender equality and GBV.
- The data gathered from the pilot process contributed to building capacity in data management amongst participating organisations.
- Interestingly, the playroom observation tool was found to serve two functions: it was used to gather implementation evidence (during the data collection process) and to help guide input to practitioners (during mentorship visits) on ways they could improve their practices. This shows how certain M&E tools can provide direct support and offer immediate benefit for participants as well as collect data.



Other uses of the data gathered include: .



COLLABORATION AND COOPERATION

Collaboration across the Ntataise Network and with other sector players is central to Ntataise’s mission. This Learning Brief highlights how collaborative processes were integrated at every level, from materials development to training models, community outreach and common M&E tools. Ongoing extensions and adaptations have also relied on knowledge-sharing. A key goal is to embed GBV prevention training into the system, similar to the integration of HIV awareness in health and education programmes. Gender-responsive pedagogies should be incorporated into professional pathways for ECD practitioners, accredited training, and parenting programmes.

[Click here for GBV Prevention Programme Pilot Evaluation Report](#)

[Click here for Summary Graphic Pilot Lessons Learned](#)



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