

Post-Project Reviews: Lessons Never Learned



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Lessons learned processes usually fail. Here's how to use them to improve the performance of PMs, the team and executives with a "living lessons learned" process.

In most organizations, lessons learned processes are ineffective and the organization suffers from the same mistakes on one project after another. Even worse, the bigger the project failure the less likely we are to learn from it. The same issues that cause a project to fail also prevent the people involved from learning from the failure. We need processes to ensure that we do not relive project failures. Let's take a look at a typical lessons learned session and then talk about the right way to do it.

Poking Through the Wreckage

You shuffled into your project's lessons learned session, sick and tired of the political games and the finger-pointing. Twenty minutes later, you trudged out with the voices still echoing in your head:

"No, you're responsible for us finishing late!"

"Me? You keep making changes. I'm surprised we ever finished!"

"You still aren't finished; the crap you gave us still doesn't work!"

"What? We gave you what you asked for! You just didn't train your people to use it"

"They'd need PhD's to use what you built!"

You walked down the hall knowing that this was your fault. Sure, there were jerks involved and it would be easy to blame them but a good project manager should be able to structure things to make even the jerks productive.

As scenes like this repeat themselves after each project, the organization's processes for doing projects don't improve. The same problems wreck project after project. But there is an

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Living Lessons Learned

What we need instead is a living lessons learned process that gives the organization and its project managers an opportunity for continuous improvement. It would also be valuable if the time we invest in our lessons learned positively affects projects that are underway and reinforces the use of a consistent methodology for project management. We gain all these advantages with a living lessons learned process, conducted in three stages.

Pre-Launch Peer Review

We have experienced good success with our 4PM clients using peer reviews of projects that are nearing launch. That sounds fancier than it is. PMs get feedback on a their plan from other PMs. Sometimes we even hold a live web meeting to discuss a recent plan. That gives PMs the chance to share ideas and renew their understanding of the methodology.

While the pre-launch stage is a busy time for project managers, it's also the point at which correcting mistakes is least expensive. The process is straightforward. The other project managers review the business situation faced by the user or client. Then they independently critique the strategic planning, scope, requirements, WBS decomposition, charter, accountability structure, project team assignments and schedule. If the organization's PM methodology places a premium on thinking rather than paperwork, reviewing several project plans does not take the other project managers very long.

In the session itself, the other PM's ask questions and offer ideas, which may, or may not, be taken by the project manager. The project manager whose work is under review gets the benefit of the thinking of other PM's engaged in the same type of work. Every project manager suffers from tunnel vision as he or she works through the final development of a detailed plan. So the thinking of other project managers who are not buried in all the detail can be enormously helpful. They can spot disconnects between the user's or client's business problem and the project plan details. However, it is important to keep this conversation up at the project management level, focusing on "Are we doing the right project for this business problem?" and "Does the planned control

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process make sense for the desired business result and resources involved?" The conversation should not sink into a technology debate.

It's interesting how effective sessions like these can be in building consistency in the use of a project management methodology. Compliance with project management standards tends to slip under the pressure of all the work that has to be done just prior to launch. But when project managers know their peers will be reviewing their work, they comply at a point in the lifecycle where comments from project office or standards people might otherwise be brushed aside.

Last, these pre-launch peer reviews are ideal for reinforcing the organization's project management methodology. We have the right people gathered and we're dealing with real business situations and projects, not theoretical ideals. As a result, these sessions are good opportunities to renew people's skills in using the organization's project management methodology.

Portfolio Management Change Control

The second stage in our living lessons learned process is regular (usually weekly) review of project variances. At the end of the weekly status report or team meeting and after corrective action has been decided, the PM should go through the variances again. This second round is focused on how to avoid the same variances in the future and to identify other tasks or people who are likely to encounter the same issue. Ways to avoid a repeat are the focus and it does not take long to identify options.

To accomplish this review, the project methodology must give us a reliable method of identifying changes to the approved baseline schedule. We need a methodology that gives us objective measures of project progress plus the work and cost estimates to measure the variance.

Assessing Project Team Culture and Leadership Style

The last stage of our living lessons learned is the periodic assessment of the project manager's leadership style and the culture of the project team. Obviously the work attitudes and effectiveness of project team members are strongly influenced by the leadership behavior of the PM. But even a professional team may suffer in silence about the PM's leadership rather than take the risk of providing constructive feedback.

Frank feedback is very useful so we have to make it safe. An effective technique is to ask the team to have lunch together

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once a quarter. The PM does not attend but asks them to write a summary of the PM's strengths and weaknesses on which they reached consensus. The PM should digest the information but ask no questions about it. Most importantly the PM should not make them justify any of the negative findings. That makes the PM appear defensive. Good project managers act on negative feedback and make themselves better. Bad PMs can't handle the criticism and learn nothing.

Summary

In sum, the three-tiered living lessons learned process for project management improvement can be an important element in moving the organization toward delivering consistently successful projects. It also can contribute to developing a cadre of consistently effective project managers. We include this living lessons learned process in our project management methodology so organizations and their PMs get better over time and don't repeatedly relive failures.

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