

Lessons Learnt – the Last Taboo of Project Management?

“Human beings, who are almost unique among animals in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so”

- Douglas Adams

An Early Memory

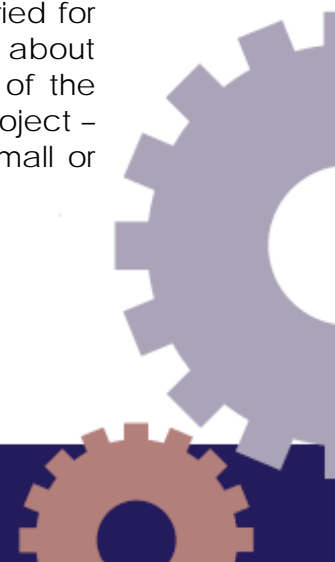
The most memorable Lessons Learnt review I attended at the end of a long and ultimately successful project went something like this: The Project Manager opened the session to the assembled throng of technicians, business representatives and assorted stakeholders with the words **“OK this is your chance to say what went wrong in the project and who gets to carry the can.”** The next hour and a half was perhaps the most entertaining (but least productive) meeting I had attended in a long while! When the dust had finally cleared and the finger pointing was over, it got me thinking – was there a different way to do this – I mean *really* capture valuable experiences from the team and turn them into true lessons to be learnt?

A Reality Check

Most Lessons Learnt reviews (if they exist at all) are a by-product of a formal Project Implementation review and consist of a few words of wisdom from the weary Project Manger recorded for posterity on a document that no one ever reads. For many of those more enlightened companies where a separate Lessons Learnt review actually happens, the input at the meeting is informal or unstructured and hence the output has only limited value – rarely does a change in process or behaviour result from such a review – and surely that should be the point?

Lessons Learnt – Are they Worth the Bother?

Lessons learnt from projects are an essential organisational tool, as only from this process do you get to understand what worked well, what was tried for the first time that was successful and what didn't work so well. It's about having the opportunity to share experiences, innovations and tricks of the trade while they are still fresh in the mind of all those involved in the project – so a review must be done immediately after implementation of a small or medium project or after each major phase of a large project.



A Template for Success

The Lessons Learnt reviews that we advocate and run follow a five point Preparation Plan:

1. Separate the review from all other meetings e.g. Project Implementation Review; Project Steering Group
2. Use an experienced facilitator to run the show (not the Project Manager!) – and bring in a separate note-taker
3. Organise the meeting such that it is structured and timed (1.5 hours maximum)
4. Invite all members of the project team and all key stakeholders
5. Prime all attendees with a 1-1 pre-meeting to help organise their thoughts

The Golden Rule for a Lessons Learnt review is all about language: words such as 'failure', 'blame' and 'better' serve no useful purpose. In fact all Lessons Learnt reviews should have the same aim: to answer two key questions:

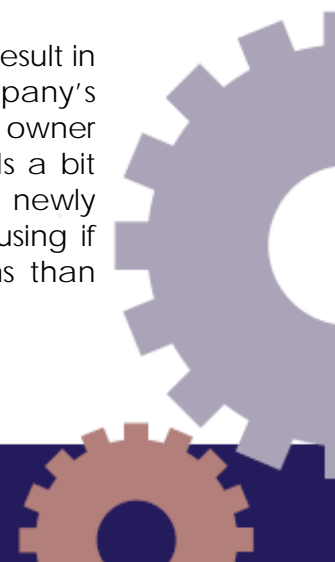
- **What did we do well?**
- **What could be done differently next time?**

The review should be structured to allow for a short discussion relating to recognisable project events or enablers – such as:

- Initiation and kick off meeting
- Stakeholder identification and engagement
- Allocation of project resources
- Processes, tools and techniques used
- Testing
- Live running
- After we went live
- Benefits realisation

In the review the facilitator (and note taker) should focus on those comments that pass the test of 'something we did well' or 'something that could be done differently next time' and politely ignore the rest. After the session, two lists should be created: one headed Recommendations and the other Observations.

As a rule of thumb, a Recommendation is a suggested action that will result in a change of process (or sometimes a change of behaviour) in the company's project framework or methodology. Each Recommendation needs an owner nominated to take it forward and a timescale for completion (sounds a bit like a project plan?). An Observation is a useful hint or tip – possibly a newly tried shortcut – that others could use in projects – or indeed, avoid using if what was tried went awry! There are likely to be more Observations than Recommendations in a typical Lessons Learnt review.



An Example of a Recommendation:

One project had been properly scoped and resourced but was subsequently suspended when priorities changed and resources had to be reallocated. When the project was restarted and, inevitably timescales were being squeezed, the Project Manager took the decision to run a new Project Initiation Meeting, which to the sponsor seemed like a complete waste of valuable time. As it happened, the delay in time had subtly altered one key requirement and this was discovered at the initiation meeting in time to take immediate action to re-scope the deliverables and thus save embarrassment and cost further down the line. The recommendation was clear and immediately incorporated into the company's project Framework "**Whenever a project is re-started a formal project initiation meeting should be held as though it were a new piece of work**"

An Example of an Observation:

The week before live date, testing with the business teams was at a peak of activity. The project team was based on the fourth floor and the business users on the ground floor. As the communication between the teams became more frequent and frenzied the Project Manager noticed his team members spending an ever increasing part of their time travelling in the lift or on the staircase between the floors. He made a snap decision and **moved his entire team down to the ground floor to sit alongside the business for the rest of the week**. Problems such as desks, systems access and telephones were addressed head on and by the end of the day everything was running smoothly and communication between the teams improved immeasurably. As an Observation this was of great interest to other Project Managers but not necessarily practical in every case so it didn't quite make the grade as a Recommendation.

The All-Important Follow Through

A short report summarising the outputs should be circulated to all who attended plus the wider group of interested stakeholders including senior management and business users. The facilitator – who could be based in the Project Support Unit – would then provide regular reports on progress on how the Recommendations are being resolved. Observations should be made accessible to all project managers and project teams and all recent lessons learnt reports should be tabled at every Project and Business Management meeting for discussion.

In this way lessons will not only be properly captured at the end of projects but there is a chance – and just a chance - that they may also be learnt!