

Learning Lessons – Before You Begin, as You Progress, and When You Have Finished

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Einstein once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result each time.

This statement can be applied to the way in which we approach projects. If we do not take the time to learn from the previous experiences of both ourselves and others, capture what we learn as we go, and sum it up when we finish, how can we expect to assimilate and pass on the lessons we all learn?

This article does not cover in detail the processes involved in effectively learning lessons. A large amount of material and advice from specialists already exists on the subject; rather, we put forward just a few “pointers to consider” for your latest project – whether it is getting ready to start or already underway.

Learn before you do something by “thinking smart.”

Every project is unique. Whilst that is true, it is highly likely (indeed, probable) that someone has completed a project similar to the one that you and your team have already started or will soon undertake. To make the best use of past lessons, “think smart.” There is now a huge amount of historic material, both technical or generic, available to everyone, both in the public domain and proprietary. Not everything is recorded and codified. How do you find the “golden nuggets” of lessons that will help you the most?

A lesson learned can be defined as “knowledge gained from experience, successful or otherwise, for the purpose of improving future performance.” It may be in the form of knowledge that is incorporated into a work process, policy, or guideline, a tip to enhance future performance, a solution to a problem or a corrective action, or an example of an adverse situation to avoid.

Whilst many of us enjoy the challenge of solving challenges, it is important to ask yourself:

- *What are the most important things I need to know?*
- *Where can I find the answers to my questions?*
- *What sources can I re-use, and where are they located?*
- *With whom can I discuss it?*

How you conduct your “learning before” activities and the amount of time and expense you invest depends on the task you have. As a minimum, we believe it is worth making the effort to talk to others and to listen to their stories. In addition, you might consider setting up a formal meeting with a team that has completed a similar project; you may even “role play” with these people what could happen during your own project. Whatever method(s) you adopt, the key is to

ensure that you think smart and equip yourself with the knowledge that will help make your project a success. Don't do things the same way that you did last time if you want to see a different outcome!

One more piece of advice on "learning before": when you are starting a new project, don't go to the same people you always approach to learn from past events. Think "outside the box." Do you know people who work in other departments within your organisation, or, assuming this is acceptable company policy, different organisations, perhaps even different industries or professions?

Learn as you go.

Learning as you go during a project sounds logical, but often we fail to make time for it, because we are too busy working on the project itself. Hmm, that sounds odd, but it's true! Taking the time to learn lessons with "quick recaps" during a project can really help. It does not need to be done in a formal way. Some organisations tackle it with short, sharp reviews of what happened and why, and seek a consensus about what needs to change "mid-flight." Think about making the time to do this on your project – but only if you are prepared to absorb and act upon the feedback for the rest of the project.

Conduct a proper "lessons learned" review at the end of your project.

It is important to review the lessons everyone has learnt after the project comes to an end. In fact, consider making it a "must have" requirement for closing the project. Some people refer to end of project lessons, learnt sessions as "Retrospectives," and others call them Post Implementation Reviews or simply Lessons Learnt Reviews. Regardless of the name, it is important to wrap up your project with a review of what worked well and what could have worked better, and that your lessons are transferred to some kind of "coordination point" (e.g. a Project Management Office) for future use. This article does not go into the detail of how best to conduct such a review; instead, we summarise just a few key points to consider:

- *Appoint a facilitator if you can – they will be impartial and will help to guide the process.*
- *Review the good and the not so good and focus on the "golden nuggets" that can be reused.*
- *Discuss how future projects can take advantage of the lessons learnt and how to interject them into the org/team.*

Embed your learnings into "the way you do things."

When a pertinent lesson is learnt, can you or, if available, the Project Management Office, embed these lessons into a new or revised procedure or policy? If not, can you ensure that all future projects learn from it?

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that simple processes for learning lessons before, during, and after a project can be an immense help to you, your teams and the organisations for which you work.

If you have an opinion on this article, we would really like to hear from you. Please email us at Contactus@pmoracles.com with your thoughts.