Avoid the Same Old Mistakes by Focussing on Lessons Learned

By Duncan Haughey, PMP

It’s said there are no new project management sins, just old ones repeated. It’s also said that we don’t learn the lessons from past projects and this must be true, otherwise why would we keep making the same old mistakes.

In his article, Lessons Learned: Why Don’t we Learn From Them? Derry Simmel, board member of PMI's PMO SIG, identifies two common problems preventing us learning valuable lessons from past projects:

1. We think the lessons don’t apply to us.
2. We want to get things done

"The sad truth is that these lessons learned are useful. That time spent in doing the work better is time well spent. That getting it right the first time is cheaper and easier than doing it now and fixing it later," Derry says.

So if we accept that lessons from past projects are indeed useful and can prevent problems later down the line; how can organisations create a lessons learned culture where people not only take the trouble to learn from past projects, but actually want to learn. A culture where we apply best practices and discard bad ones.

Leadership

For new initiatives to succeed it’s usually best to take a top down approach. The organisation's senior leadership need to foster and support a lessons learned culture. This is likely to be more successful and long lasting than a bottom up approach, although this could have limited success if project managers promote it strongly themselves.

Given top level support, enough time and buy-in from project managers, lessons learned will become part of the organisation's culture and part of its continuous improvement process.

Process for Capturing Lessons Learned

If project managers are going to actively contribute to the project management knowledge within an organisation and make use of it, then we have to make it easy for them. Nobody is going to go out of their way to do it. So it’s important to have a well defined and simple process for collecting, collating, analysing and disseminating lessons learned. It could be along the lines of discover - recommend - document - share - review - store - retrieve.

Discover

Project teams should learn to identify lessons during projects and record them for inclusion in a lessons learned report at the end of the project. This might be done as part of their regular team meetings.

A sign that a project may be having a "lessons learned moment," is when the resources or customers are unhappy and discussing problems between themselves outside team and other project meetings. Lessons may also crop up during a project when team members identify areas for improvement.

Arrange regular brainstorming sessions with the project team, with an independent facilitator, to unearth valuable lessons. Don't leave it until the end of the project when memories have faded.

Lessons can be discovered by asking these three questions:

1. What went right?
2. What went wrong?
3. What could have been better?
Use the facilitator to document the lessons, keep the meeting focussed on key issues, and steer the discussion in the right direction.

**Recommend**
Project managers and their teams should make recommendations. What would they do differently if they could go back and start over again?

This needs a degree of honesty that some team members may find uncomfortable. The feedback needs to be constructive and avoid getting personal. We are not looking to play the blame game here; we need to understand how things could be done better in the future.

For this to work effectively the organisation's leadership needs to reward this honesty, and demonstrate it will not have a negative impact on individual careers.

**Document and Share**
It is important to document and share findings. The best way to do this is by creating a standard lessons learned report and a repository with good meta-data to help with identification. This should be kept updated with lessons from the most recent projects in order to take account of the current working environment, structures and constraints.

Standard format reports and meta-data will make it easier when reviewing multiple documents and searching the repository using keywords and phrases.

**Review**
It is the job of the Project Management Office (PMO) to review lessons learned reports and pull out issues that arise multiple times. Recurring issues can be surfaced and presented in a general "read this first" list of lessons.

The PMO must look at what makes projects succeed and what makes them fail, and give recommendations that sit along side those of the project teams.

**Store**
Lessons learned must be stored in a central repository with general access. Create a system for storage and retrieval of lessons. Online systems are ideal for this, giving easy access to the lessons. Most organisations have portals and Intranets that can be used for this purpose.

**Retrieve**
Retrieving lessons learned on a regular basis must be part of the organisation's culture. Project managers should be expected to retrieve and review lessons prior to commencing a project. They should have this as part of their annual performance objectives and be able to demonstrate they have retrieved, reviewed and applied lessons wherever applicable.

**Summary**
Creation of a successful lessons learned culture needs leadership support as well as time and buy-in from project managers. Implementation of a simple process for collecting, collating, analysing and disseminating lessons learned is essential if it’s to be adopted.

Once lessons have been captured, they need to be made available to all project teams to help them avoid repeating problems of the past. It is important that these teams understand what past projects have to tell them and act upon that information.

History has a strange way of repeating itself. If we don't take time to learn the lessons of the past, and moreover act upon them, we will continue to commit the same project management sins again and again. And don't think it won't happen to you, it will.

Remember, in the words of Derry Simmel, "...time spent in doing the work better is time well spent."
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