

The challenge of learning project lessons

As individual humans, we manage to learn lessons quite efficiently. It's one of the reasons that we've survived for as long as we have. If the kettle is hot, we learn not to touch it. If the food smells bad, we learn not to eat it. If the crossing light is red, we learn not to step out onto the road. We learn – through those experiences – to avoid harming ourselves.

We also learn facts about our environment – the earth orbits the sun, fruit generally falls down from a tree, $2+2=4$, the computer always says “no”, and England never win football matches on penalties.

Those experiences and facts become part of our individual memories. We change our behaviour to avoid burning ourselves on hot kettles, eating bad food, and watching England play football matches.

Individuals can learn lessons efficiently. We can also share individual learnings so others can benefit and similarly change their behaviours, although facts are probably shared more easily and effectively than experiences.

But I've yet to experience an effective process to share lessons learned in project management.

Why?

If the process of learning lessons has served the human race well over millennia, would there not be some value in applying the same process to the management of projects?

Of course (as you're now shouting), most project management methodologies attempt to do exactly that. A lessons-learned exercise should be scheduled as part of the closedown of a project, and a lessons-learned-log might even be maintained throughout the project's life.

But, despite working on many different projects in many different organisations, I've yet to experience those processes working effectively. So what's going wrong, and how can we apply the technique that has protected the species for millennia to improve the management of projects?

After the Lord Mayor's Show

If a lessons-learned exercise does take place, it can be somewhat “after the Lord Mayor's show”. The project has delivered, success has been celebrated, focus has turned to other priorities, and the PM schedules another meeting to reflect on yesterday's project. Interest levels, motivation and enthusiasm will not be high.

Hindsight isn't available at any time, and in a high-pressure project environment there's often little time for detailed analysis.

Furthermore, with a project of any meaningful duration, the likelihood is that the project team will have changed during the project's life. Those involved in the early days may have left the organisation as well as the project team. They're busy with other work and so their perspectives and learnings are not available to the learning-the-lessons process. The process is, at best, incomplete.

Another risk is that those who do attend will do so with some degree of self-interest. Primarily self-protection. If (very small “if”) something did go wrong during the project, the focus of some

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attendees will be to ensure that any blame does not land on their desk. I have seen, and participated in, lessons-learned meetings which have quickly degenerated into “wasn’t my fault” arguments.

A good facilitator can overcome those problems. The challenge is then to identify the root causes, to establish what might – or should – have been done differently, and what to do differently in future.

And, “why” it should have been different – that’s the key question. Hindsight isn’t available at any time, and in a high-pressure project environment there’s often little time for detailed analysis. Some decisions may have been instinctive, based on the experience of those involved rather than detailed analysis. But that’s because live projects often don’t have time for deeply detailed analysis.

And there’s the difficulty that what was right (with hindsight) in that previous situation, may not be right in a future situation when other factors are different. Learning lessons may just result in future mistakes, from which lessons aren’t then learned because that would challenge a previous learning!

But let’s assume that your organisation is different and that those problems don’t apply. Past lessons are equally applicable to future situations.

There’s another problem heading over the horizon.

How do the lessons enter the corporate memory? How are the learnings captured in such a way that they can be retrieved and applied by future project managers?

I don’t think that they can be. Not effectively. You have to rely on them becoming embedded in the memory of the individual project manager as part of them building their capability and expertise.

The project manager will remember the critical lessons – that’s his or her survival guide. A central lessons-learned log may be run by a CMO/PMO, but how often are the generic lessons extracted and incorporated into the in-house methodology? How many project managers sit down and read through the central corporate log at the outset of a new project?

Relying on the expert professional who has acquired, tested and applied knowledge is what most organisations do in most disciplines. That knowledge can be used to improve standard processes, but will never replace the expert operator who also knows when to deviate from the standard.

There isn’t a shared corporate-memory “lessons learned log” in Finance, Marketing, HR, or IT. But there are lots of expert individuals. The same applies to the discipline of project management.

You can’t learn and share the project manager’s expertise, nor capture it into the bottle of a lessons-learned log. You have to find a project manager who’s learned – and is still happy to learn – the lessons of project management, and who knows when not to touch the kettle.

Contact the author

tonyvince@deliveryconsulting.com


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