



Learn the Value of Lessons-Learned

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“Sharing knowledge in a systematic format, documenting lessons-learned, and ensuring frequent communication will maximize project success factors.”

Overview

Whether managing one project or a group of Project Managers who manage multiple projects, the value of lessons-learned sharing and communication should not be undervalued. It can be the difference between total project success and missing key milestones and project delay.

A large number of Project Managers operate in an industry where the projects they manage will have similar components and attributes as previously managed projects (i.e. IT, construction, telecommunications, etc.). Therefore, although the exact project with all its attributes may not be repeated, the lessons-learned documentation and communication should occur. It may well save the next project or another project manager’s position for that matter.

Value

When managing a team of Project Managers who work on similar and ongoing projects, the value of lessons-learned documentation and communication should be evident, although polls would probably show this discipline is limited in practice. Since Project Managers who work on similar projects will run into similar obstacles, it is imperative that they share how they overcame these obstacles. It will ensure the same mistakes are not repeated at the cost of project delay, budget overruns and customer dissatisfaction.

Project Implementation Review (PIR)

When conducting a Project Implementation Review (PIR), updating the lessons-learned documentation, as well as holding a lessons-learned review meeting, is critical to two specific things:

- 1) Not repeating the same mistakes
- 2) Improving the probability of balancing the triple constraint so as to not have cost or schedule overruns on future projects.

Some of the mistakes and problems that typically occur that could be gathered as part of lessons-learned documentation include issues with the following:

- Vendor management
- Equipment delivery
- Project approval
- Budget approval

- Communication (lateral and vertical)
- Testing
- Technical support
- Training

and the list can go on almost infinitely.

People move on. They find new positions or new careers. It happens on a regular basis, think of your own team and industry. When a person who has put thousands of hours into a project moves on, AND there is no lessons-learned documentation or previous communication, what happens to the knowledge gained by that person on the thousands of hours they put into the project work? That's right...it move on with them. Wouldn't you want their valuable knowledge and hard earned successes to be saved in a central location, so it could be of value in the future?

Solutions

A solution my team has found valuable for overcoming many of these obstacles has been a shared, searchable online database. Fellow Project Managers can access lessons-learned by keyword.

For example, say a Project Manager is working on a technical implementation project in the U.S. where they are ordering Primary Rate Interface circuits from a local exchange carrier in Washington State and are having problems with circuit delivery due to local building code in Washington. If a previous Project Manager had already encountered a similar problem and found a work-around AND it was entered into the lessons-learned database, the Project Manager with the current problem could find the work-around quicker, rather than banging their head on the wall coming up with a new solution (especially when that solution could be right at their fingertips!)

If you stop to think about it, doesn't it make complete sense to have the answers to your potential problems catalogued prior to your project even beginning? Think of the project delay you will avoid and the positive impact on your triple constraint!

Lessons-learned Meeting

A lessons-learned weekly or bi-weekly meeting is another great tool for sharing information on how obstacles were overcome, and what could be done better on the next phase or next project. (Some people might refer to this meeting at the end of a project as a post-mortem, which you might want to avoid due to the negative connotation. Lessons-learned meeting or something of the like is a more positive name.)

Recorded Lessons-learned

Another valuable asset in this process can be the use of recorded meetings, chats, e-mails, etc. Whether an audio, video, or written capturing device is used should be appropriate to the project and the subject. Video would be preferred in most instances, but has a cost associated, and really should only be used if necessary (i.e. if whiteboard presentations are made, etc.) considering budget.

Audio is probably the best media method of capturing lessons-learned meeting minutes due to fairly limited cost and flexibility (even a tape recorder would do.) Many companies now have conference call recording, and this should be utilized to

capture and record meeting minutes (my company retains these calls for seven days, so we listen and record the minutes of each meeting, then distribute to Project Managers and key stakeholders.) You can also store e-mails in a central folder (easy using Microsoft Outlook) or share lessons-learned Word documents on a central shared folder.

The method used to share knowledge does not have to be high tech. It can be as simple as capturing notes in a binder that can be accessed by all. However, the easier it is for Project Managers to access and read the documentation, the higher the chance it will be used, and the better the impact for your projects and/or program. (We use a Microsoft Access database that can be searched by keyword. This is a valuable asset in finding direct impact lessons.)

Central Phone Numbers

Another idea is to have a central list of phone numbers, e-mails, pagers, so that fellow Project Managers can be contacted after hours and on weekends if necessary, to find out if they have encountered similar problems and have knowledge of the solutions. This can be an invaluable asset to project success (and may seem to be evident.) However, be cautioned that information exchanges here are less valuable if they are not documented. Due to limitations in these communications channels, not all Project Managers will have access to the information exchange between two colleagues on a phone call or e-mail. Its value is diminished if not documented and published in a central location which can be accessed by all.

Potential Issues and Obtaining Buy-In

One issue you may encounter when implementing shared knowledge, is the fact that people tend to be territorial about the knowledge they have gained. They may see what they know, and only THEY know, as job security. One way to allay those fears is to let your project team know that they each have their own specific experiences and knowledge that is valuable to the team. By contributing and sharing this knowledge they are proving their worth. If the manager recognizes and communicates this fact, the Project Manager will be more likely to share the experiences they have had. As a manager and leader, you should also recognize the importance of a person that is willing to share their hard earned knowledge and experiences.

As such, other managers and leaders may recognize the value of such people. That is why it is critical to capture and if possible, catalogue, their knowledge. It is quite possible, and even probable, that the types of problems encountered on certain projects will change less than the actual Project Managers change positions.

It is critical for the Project Managers to understand in this process, that the knowledge is being catalogued for both immediate and long-term usage. They must understand that as individual leaders themselves, they are charged with leaving a legacy of their knowledge to future leaders. This is of course, in addition to having the work-arounds at their fingertips for both their own future use as well as their current colleagues.

Risk Management

The lessons-learned documentation practices spoken of in this document can be an integral part of Project Risk Management as identified in the Project Management Body of Knowledge. There are several areas of risk management that lesson(s)-learned can be incorporated into. One of the inputs to risk identification is historical

information. It is easy to see that historical information is captured in your lessons-learned database. An input to both qualitative and quantitative risk analysis is identified risks, which can be obtained via lessons-learned meetings as well as the database or shared knowledge folder. As well, project communication is an input to Risk Monitoring and Control, and much of the communication about problems and risk factors would occur at your lessons-learned meeting.

Summary

Regardless of the method of information sharing on lessons-learned, it must be done in order to assist Project Managers on future and existing projects, and to ensure that the same mistakes don't happen twice. An effective Communications and Risk Management plan should always include specific methods of sharing lessons-learned.

Hopefully, you've learned lessons about lessons-learned here. Remember, it's not the method of documentation that counts as much as the fact that documentation of knowledge gained exists. However, high tech documentation combined with ease of use never hurts if you have the resources. Now it's your turn to teach the lessons you've learned.

About the Author

Scott Seningen, PMP holds a Master's Certificate in Project Management from The George Washington University, School of Business and Public Management, and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Villanova University. He is a member of the Project Management Institute and has been practicing IT project management for over seven years.

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