

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

By Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, Jeff Hodgkinson

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.

About Our Authors

Gareth Byatt, Gary Hamilton, and Jeff Hodgkinson are experienced PMO, program, and project managers who developed a mutual friendship by realising they shared a common passion to help others and share knowledge about PMO, portfolio, program and project management (collectively termed PM below). In February 2010 they decided to collaborate on a five (5) year goal to write 100 PM subject articles (pro bono) for publication in any/all PM subject websites, newsletters, and professional magazines / journals. They have been translated into Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian and published on websites in Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, UK, and the USA. Their mission is to help expand good program and project management practices by promoting the PM profession, to be a positive influence to the PM Community, and in earnest hope readers can gain benefit from the advice of their 60+ years of combined experience and expertise (and the expertise of co-authors who write with them on certain articles and subjects). Although all three are well credentialed, together they have the distinction in particular of being 3 of only 25 worldwide that hold the Project Management Institute's PMP[®], PgMP[®], and PMI-RMP[®] Credentials. Gary and Jeff have all five (5) of the PMI 'family of credentials'.

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Jeff Hodgkinson is a 31 year veteran of Intel Corporation, where he continues on a progressive career as a program/project manager. He is the most experienced Intel MAPP (Make A Project Plan) Day Facilitator at Intel with over 150 facilitation events to his credit. Jeff is an IT@Intel Expert and blogs on Intel's Community for IT Professionals for Program/Project Management subjects and interests. Jeff received the 2010 PMI (Project Mgmt Institute) Distinguished Contribution Award for his support of the Project Management profession from the Project Management Institute. Jeff was also the 2nd place finalist for the 2009 Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award[™]. He lives in Mesa, Arizona, USA and volunteers as the Associate Vice President for Credentials & Certifications for the Phoenix PMI Chapter. Because of his contributions to helping people achieve their goals, he is the third (3rd) most recommended person on LinkedIn with 525+ recommendations, and is ranked in the Top 75 (currently 60th) most networked LinkedIn person. He gladly accepts all connection invite requests from PM practitioners at: www.linkedin.com/in/jeffhodgkinson. Jeff holds numerous certifications and credentials in program and project management, which are as follows: CCS, CDT, CPC[™], CIPM[™], CPPM–Level 10, CDRP, CSQE, IPMA Level-B[®], ITIL-F, MPM[™], PME[™], PMOC, PMP[®], PgMP[®], PMI-RMP[®], PMI-SP[®], CAPM[®], PMW, and SSGB (Six Sigma Green Belt). He is an expert at program and project management principles and best practices. He enjoys sharing his experiences with audiences around the globe as a keynote speaker at various PM events. Email Jeff: ijhmesa@gmail.com or at: phxpmicredentials@yahoo.com



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