Beyond Post-Mortems and Lessons Learned: Retrospectives as a Basis for Organizational Growth

“Insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result”
- Albert Einstein

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Agenda

6:35 – 7:15 Presentation
  • Thoughts About Project Reviews
  • Lessons Learned Process - PMBOK®
  • Retrospectives
  • The Facilitator’s Role
  • Retrospective Planning
  • Retrospective Attitude
  • References

7:15 – 8:55 Mini Workshop
Thoughts About Project Reviews

• Team Retrospective - “A reality-based learning experience resulting in action and change.” __ Team Retrospectives – for better iterative assessment

• “Time for Reflection – Pause in any activity to reflect on what is working well and what should be done differently.” __ Fearless Change – Patterns for Introducing New Ideas

• “A Charter’s way of having another Charter.” __ III

• Project Retrospective - “A ritual held at the end of a project to learn from the experience and to plan changes for the next effort.”
   __ Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews

• “A special meeting where the team gathers after completing an increment of work to inspect and adapt their methods and teamwork.”
   __ Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great

• “A Lessons Learned session focuses on identifying project successes and project failures, and includes recommendations to improve future performance on projects.” __ PMBOK® Guide Third Edition

• “At regular intervals the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.” __ Principles Behind the Agile Manifesto
Project Post Mortem...

10.2.2.4 Lessons Learned Process (Information Distribution Tools and Techniques)

• “A lessons learned session focuses on identifying project successes and project failures, and includes recommendations to improve future performance on projects.”

• “Lessons learned provide future project teams with the information that can increase effectiveness and efficiency of project management.”

• “Project managers have a professional obligation to conduct lessons learned sessions for all projects with key internal and stakeholders, particularly if the project yielded less than desirable results.”

• “In addition, phase-end lessons learned sessions provide a good team-building exercise.”
“Lessons Learned [Output/Input]. The learning gained from the process of performing the project. Lessons learned may be identified at any point. Also considered a project record to be included in the lessons learned knowledge base.”

____ PMBOK® Guide Fourth Edition Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Lessons Learned” Input to Knowledge Areas:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Develop Project Charter</td>
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<td>4.2 Develop Project Management Plan</td>
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<td>4.4 Monitor and Control Project Work</td>
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<td>5.2 Define Scope</td>
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<td>5.3 Create WBS</td>
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<td>6.1 Define Activities</td>
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<td>6.4 Estimate Activity Duration</td>
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<td>7.1 Estimate Costs</td>
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Lessons Learned Process (cont’d)

Output as *Update Organizational Process Assets* during Process Close

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Lessons Learned” Output from Knowledge Areas:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.6 Close Project or Phase</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.5 Control Scope</td>
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<td>6.5 Control Schedule</td>
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<td>7.3 Control Costs</td>
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<td>8.5 Perform Quality Control</td>
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<td>9.4 Manage Project Team</td>
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<td>10.3 Distribute Information</td>
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<td>10.4 Manage Stakeholder Expectations</td>
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<td>10.5 Report Performance</td>
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<td>11.6 Monitor &amp; Control Risks</td>
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The Lessons Learned Process was in *Information Distribution Tools and Techniques* in the Third Edition.

Where do you think it is in the Fourth Edition?
Lessons Learned Process (cont’d)

There is NO Lessons Learned Process in the PMBOK® Guide Fourth Edition!
Lessons Learned Process (cont’d)

PMBOK® Guide Fourth Edition

3.6 Monitoring & Controlling Process Group

“… The key benefit of this Process group is that project performance is observed and measured regularly and consistently to identify variances from the project management plan.”

Executing Process Group

4.3 Direct and Manage Project Execution – “The process of performing the work defined in the project management plan to achieve the project’s objectives.” Activities include –

“collect and document lessons learned and implement approved process improvement activities.”

4.3.2 Direct and Manage Project Execution Tools & Techniques

4.3.2.1 Expert Judgment
The Lessons Learned (PMBOK®) Context

Boundary Model

Benefit From Experience

- Conduct Lessons Learned Session
- Lessons Learned
- Recommendations
- Update Organizational Process Assets

Document Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned/Recommendations

Lessons Learned

Project Results

Participant Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned Knowledge Base (input to future efforts)

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What is a Project Retrospective?

“Project Retrospective” refers to a retrospective held at any time during a project, not only at project completion.

- a group of people who worked or are working together on a project
- coming together to explore their individual perceptions of how the experience evolved or is evolving
- determining what aspects of the project went or are going well, identifying areas that can be improved upon, and creating an Action Plan for addressing/implementing what has been learned.
The Project Retrospective Context

Benefit From Experience

Conduct Retrospective (Inspect)

Invoke Change Behaviors (Adapt)

Boundary Model

Purpose

Project Results

Retrospective Guidelines

Participant Experiences

Retrospective Report

Action Plan

Old Ways

New Ways

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Retrospective Principles

1. The highest-value learning results from a purposeful examination of project history by those involved.

2. Retrospectives are ultimately about the future, as conditioned by the past.

3. Safety is a mandatory pre-condition for establishing a learning environment.

4. Agility obliges retrospective planners to fashion each retrospective as a unique occurrence.

5. Retrospectives are about the human experience of working together and must embrace perceptions and feelings along with actions and facts.
Retrospective Principles (cont’d)

The highest-value learning results from a purposeful examination of project history by those involved.

“Experience gets turned into learning when an organization alters itself to take account of what experience has shown…

- the organization instills new skills and approaches in its people
- the organization redesigns itself to operate in some different manner.”

_ Peopleware – Productive Projects and Teams_  
DeMarco & Lister
Retrospective Principles (cont’d)

Retrospectives are ultimately about the future, as conditioned by the past.

The fundamental goal of a retrospective is change.

- To improve future efforts within the organization
- To increase the competence of participants
- To promote cohesive teams
Retrospective Principles (cont’d)

Safety is a mandatory pre-condition for establishing a learning environment.

Meeting safety is a hallmark of retrospectives and is essential for enabling the complete context of the undertaking to unfold.

The Facilitator must be able to create a safe environment where participants:

- Are heard as a contributors rather than critics
- Feel free to say what’s true in public
- Will experience no repercussions
Retrospective Principles (cont’d)

Agility obliges retrospective planners to fashion each retrospective as a unique occurrence.

Every effort subject to retrospectives will be unique, so planning must take into account aspects such as:

- The Requestor-defined purpose/goal
-Timing (when in the lifecycle)
- Number and roles of people involved
- Team dynamics
-Duration of the work period under review
- Meeting logistics

A retrospective can consume 10 minutes or three days, as appropriate.
Retrospective Principles (cont’d)

Retrospectives are about the human experience of working together and must embrace perceptions and feelings along with actions and facts.

“The most important lesson that I have learned is that it is human beings who are doing project tasks.”

__ Yuji Kishira, Director, Boeing Corp. Meji, Japan.

quoted in Only Human, PM Network, 2006

Project work is inherently a social activity. Control exhibits tell only a piece of the story.
The Facilitator’s Role

A retrospective is a specific type of meeting. In addition to understanding the retrospective process, basic meeting management is also needed:

- Create an Agenda and keep the group on track
- Focus on the process (How) not the content (What)
- Manage group dynamics (conflict or other disruption)
- Listen actively
- Encourage diversity of views
- Test assumptions
- Ask questions
- Clarify and summarize
- Capture/document issues for later discussion
The Facilitator’s Role (cont’d)

The Retrospective Prime Directive

“Regardless of what we discover, we must understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job he or she could, given what was known at the time, his or her skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.”

___ Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews, by Norm Kerth
The Facilitator’s Role (cont’d)

The Facilitator**:
- Is acceptable to all members of the group
- Is substantively neutral
- Is not a group member
- Has no role in the content of the group’s decisions
- Is not an intermediary between the group and the larger organization; the Facilitator’s client is the group
- Is not a judge
- Has primary responsibility for managing the group’s process
- Intervenes when the group’s process or other factors affecting the group interfere with its accomplishing specific, substantive goals
- Provides content expertise or information only when the Facilitator and the group have explicitly contracted for it

** From Schwartz, R. *The Skilled Facilitator* – See References & Recommendations
When the Unexpected Happens

It is impossible to anticipate every wrinkle that might occur in a meeting, or what it might be.

To prepare for reality, facilitators:

• Work on understanding their own reactions – what situations might make it difficult to facilitate or serve the group well? Learn what can be done to help relieve the anxiety
• Identify areas in the retrospective facilitation process where their skills need sharpening or they lack confidence. Target those areas for additional what-if planning, scripting, mentoring and training
• Consider responding to the unexpected with the unexpected
• Make a deliberate and concerted effort to LEARN FROM ALL THEIR EXPERIENCES
Retrospective Planning

Verify organizational commitment:

• establish retrospectives as part of the project plan and communicate accordingly
• ensure the use of a neutral facilitator - objectivity is critical
• verify that the requesting organization is prepared to implement recommended changes that are outcomes of the retrospective
• secure commitment for action item follow-up

Define for each retrospective:

• from the requestor point of view:
  − the purpose/goal of the retrospective
  − how the retrospective outcomes will be used to achieve the purpose/goal
  − how the requestor will know the retrospective has done its job
Define for each retrospective cont’d:

- what information will be collected, how and when, for example:
  - large or distributed groups - surveys
  - serious conflict within team or political issues - facilitator interviews prior to meeting
  - small co-located teams - collect during the retrospective meeting

- processes and exercises for:
  ★ gathering project data
  ★ surfacing learning
  ★ creating recommendations for change
  ★ creating an action plan to implement the recommendations
  - group decision-making, concurrence
Retrospective Planning (cont’d)

Determine when to hold the Retrospective

Retrospectives link strategy with execution and so are appropriate throughout the lifecycle.

For example:

- at the end of a project, phase, iteration, sprint or other designated increment
- at completion of significant deliverables
- when the work is bogged down or off track
- when there’s a change in key players, project direction, etc.

When else?
Retrospective Planning (cont’d)

Identify participants

• To maximize learning, invite participants from the entire project community

• The facilitator may exclude individuals (regardless of their role) whose presence would inhibit learning.

Who would you invite?
Who might you exclude?
Sample Agenda - Short Cycle Retrospective

Common type of format in Agile work; for frequent reviews (not end of project) with intact teams. The important point - keep it short and simple.
Sample Agenda - End of Project Retrospective

• Open the meeting
  − review the meeting purpose
  − exercise to establish a safe environment
• Celebrate accomplishments/successes
• Timeline Exercise*
  − create a Timeline of key events (from project plan and participant views)
  − participants add their attitudes/feelings about key events to Timeline
• Use provocative questions to elicit Timeline discussion and learnings:
  − identify best practices, issues and what to do differently next time
• Convert learnings to Recommendations for Change and Prioritize
  − exercise to analyze learnings; establish root cause where appropriate
• Create Action Plan (Format = Who does What, by When); include items for:
  − sharing the retrospective outcomes
  − implementing best practices, recommendations for change
  − investigation/research, communication, training proposals, etc.
• Close the meeting
  − share appreciations for team and individual efforts
  − parting exercise If the team will be disbanded

* see Kerth, N. Project Retrospectives
Timeline Example

January 2006

- IRS forms deadline
- 6 points of concern
- 1099 returns to 1099s
- Change 21 table with a P

February 2006

- Additional 1099 forms generated
- IRS electronic form generated
- Tax submission deadline for 2005
- 1099 Retro scheduled
- Tax submission deadline for 2005

March 2006

- IRS forms deadline
- File sent to Lita Church
- File sent to Lita
- May production report for 2006 generated
- 1099 Retro 5123
- Address handwritten
- handwritten line update addresses
- handwritten name

April - Present

- IRS forms deadline
- File accepted
- File accepted
- More issues

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Timeline Example (cont’d)
Project Timeline - Perspective Seismograph

- red – stressful, upsetting, unhappy
- yellow – confused, cautious, surprised
- green – successful, satisfied
- blue – challenged

![Project Timeline Chart](chart.png)
Retrospective of Retrospectives

The retrospective process, like any other, should be assessed periodically by the process owner to determine if organizational goals are being met and to plan any process improvements.

- Gather feedback from management, team members, Requestors, retrospective participants
- Evaluate performance vs. goals and expectations
- Identify and correct deficiencies
- Reset goals to reflect current requirements and constraints
Retrospective Attitude

How we view our experiences becomes self-reinforcing. We influence our work through the way we talk about our experiences… to others and to ourselves.

*Adopt a “Retrospective Attitude” as an ongoing workstyle:*

- know that you can benefit from all your experiences, even those that may turn out differently from your expectations
- welcome the uniqueness of each project as an advantage
- apply the Retrospective Prime Directive to yourself as well as others
- ask “what could be done differently next time?” vs. assigning blame
- actively look for best practices to carry forward
- encourage your colleagues and co-conspirators to see the future in the present
References/Recommendations

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• Sliger, Miclele and Broderick, Stacia *The Software Project Manager’s Bridge to Agility*, Addison-Wesley professional, 2008

• Tabaka, Jean *Collaboration Explained: Facilitation Skills for Software Project Leaders*, Addison-Wesley professional, 2006

• [http://www.retrospectives.com/](http://www.retrospectives.com/) – “a website dedicated to growing the practice of looking back to move forward”

Example of sharing Lessons Learned

Exercise - Retrospective of Dinner Meeting

Retrospective of the *Dinner Meeting Experience*

Groups of +/- 7

7:15 – 8:15 – Create agenda, hold retrospective, post outcomes

8:15 – 8:30 – View gallery

8:30 – 8:55 – Open Discussion