

# Documenting Lessons Learned: What Have You Learned?

~ By Kenneth Darter

Being able to document lessons learned after a project is complete (or even in the middle of it) is one of the biggest responsibilities a project manager has on a project. If one does not understand the mistakes of past projects, then one is doomed to repeat them over and over. In this role, the project manager becomes part historian and part archivist. Lessons learned are not just useful in the business world; they can be helpful on any project in which one is involved - at home or in your volunteer work or in your own personal hobbies. Lessons learned can make all the difference on future projects and help them to succeed, but first, they must be documented correctly.



## The Good and the Bad

Lessons learned should not just focus on the mistakes that were made; they should also document the good things that happened in the project. Otherwise, all of the processes and decisions that helped the project succeed might be lost and that would be just as bad as forgetting about the mistakes that were made. Oftentimes, everyone focuses on the mistakes that were made, and, while that is important, the project team needs to recognise what worked and make sure that those processes and techniques can be repeated in future projects.

## In the Moment

The best place and time to capture lessons learned is in the moment that the project is happening. Even though people may be busy and overwhelmed just working on the project, someone should be working to capture those items that might turn into lessons learned at the end of the project. The best time to get these items documented is right after they have happened. Otherwise, people tend to forget about what they did or even gloss over the problems and issues that occurred. They might even start telling tall tales about what happened; lessons learned need to be a truthful reflection, not a fish story.

## Solicit Data

This is primarily the project manager's responsibility, but everybody on the project should be aware that they can provide ideas and insight into the lessons learned. This truly needs to be a collaborative effort in order to succeed. Recording lessons learned should be a regular part of project management and needs to be included in the weekly and monthly processes. Once people on the team get used to providing this input, the project manager may get overwhelmed with the response. While the paperwork might get tedious, the rewards are well worth the effort.

# Publish or Preserve

Once all of the information is collected and reviewed and revised, then it is important to make sure that it is published so that everyone involved in the project is aware of the lessons learned, both positive and negative. It is also vital that this information be preserved so that the organisation and the project teams can have it the next time a similar project is being executed. Without the lessons learned from previous projects, future projects will fall into the same routines and pitfalls that occurred in previous projects.

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