Learning from Project Failures

~ By Kenneth Darter

As project managers, some of the most important lessons we learn come from failures. Whether the entire project failed, or part of it failed, or even if the project succeeded in spite of a big failure on the part of the project manager or the project team, there is something to be learned from a failure. And the best part of learning from a bad experience is that it is very hard to forget the lesson. No matter what happened though, it is important to keep things in perspective and be able to move forward. In order to make this happen, it can be helpful to process the failure and determine what the lesson is that needs to be carried forward to the rest of the project or other projects. While there may not be a need to do this formally, the project manager should still go through these steps in order to make sure that the issues that led to failure do not happen again.

Step 1: Input

Before a lesson can be learned from failure, the project manager should make sure to get input from all the different parties involved. This input might include other project managers involved in the project, the resources working on the project, the executives or sponsors involved in the project, or even external stakeholders. All of the opinions and viewpoints of these individuals should be solicited as soon as possible after the failure occurs so that the project manager collecting the information can get a firsthand account of what happened; even a brief interlude like a month or two can colour a person’s memory of events.

Step 2: Determination

Once the information has been gathered from the different sources available, then the project manager should put together a determination of what caused the failure and what would have prevented it. Performing this step might involve asking a lot of “what if” questions in order to come up with a good understanding of what happened and the lesson to be carried forward. Some examples might include:

- What if the requirements had been right when development started?
- What if the project schedule had been created before the end date was decided upon?
- What if the risk had been mitigated instead of accepted?

Step 3: Validate

Once a determination has been made, the project manager should spend some time validating the lesson learned with the same individuals that were responsible for providing input in the first step. The other viewpoints and opinions will help refine the determination and improve it in order for it to be more useful to
future projects. Once the validation is done, the project manager may need to go back through the
determination process until it is complete and verified.

**Step 4: Communicate**

The last step is to communicate the lessons learned from the failure to all of the resources involved on the
project and to the stakeholders and other decision makers. All of the information and conclusions gathered by
the project manager should become part of the enterprise knowledge going forward for other projects that
might encounter the same issues or problems. If possible, the project manager should also shout it to the world
from the rooftops. After all, lessons learned from failure can benefit everyone in the field, not just the project
manager directly involved in collecting the information.