Tips for Turning Lessons Learned into Best Practices

By Adele Sommers

Have you ever used or heard the expression, "In hindsight, knowing what we know today, we would surely have done things differently." That's usually a good indicator that there were unanticipated events or circumstances that came back to bite, haunt, or baffle the participants of a particular project or undertaking.

Although the situation might have been problematic at the time, the good news is that astute observers can retrospectively extract valuable gems of wisdom from the experience, which they can then use to their greatest advantage going forward.

20:20 Hindsight = Lessons Learned

Lessons learned are the perfect 20:20 hindsight that we frequently have after completing a project or endeavour. This hindsight is worth its weight in gold if we mine its special value, but it's absolutely worthless if we don't make use of what it has to offer.

When identifying lessons learned, our goal should be to identify what went well, what didn't go well, and why. At this point, you might be thinking, "What kind of reason can I give to my team that we should be doing this? It sounds like a bunch of bureaucratic overhead and more things to do. Once the project's finished, we're hoping to focus our attention on something else!"

The value lies in paving the way for future projects, so they will experience fewer headaches and setbacks. You don't, however, need to wait until the entire project finishes. You could capture 20:20 hindsight incrementally throughout the project, or very soon after it's over, while the issues are still fresh.

What Lessons Should You Capture?

For any problems that went largely unresolved, for instance, consider preventative measures that could help people work through or avoid the problems in the future.

Those measures might involve tools to speed up the work, checklists to make sure people don't skip important steps, and solutions for thorny problems. Examples:

- If people were stymied by complex document formats, try preparing and pre-testing some document templates that will be much easier to use next time.
- If quality was an issue because people didn't do thorough testing, try creating step-by-step checklists to guide people through the process next time.
- If you found components that were supposed to work together but didn't, and someone found a solution or a workaround, record that information to help people prevent or solve similar dilemmas in the future.
Lessons learned can produce benefits in many areas. You can use your repository of lessons learned to help your customer service or technical support personnel solve problems in a just-in-time fashion, for example. If your staff or colleagues need to address complex issues on the fly, or troubleshoot technical issues quickly over the telephone, they would need fast access to solutions for similar situations that were addressed in the past.

**20:20 Foresight = Best Practices**

After capturing a series of lessons learned, the next step is to derive what's called best practices. What is a best practice? It's a procedure or method that over time has proven itself to be better than any other procedures or methods that you were using to do the same thing. You could say that it's the very best way that you, your group, or your organisation has found of doing something.

Why do they matter? Best practices are invaluable because they're the intellectual assets, the "secret sauce" that can help organisations remain highly competitive. The ideal approach is to standardise best practices so the entire organisation follows them. You could incorporate them into policies, procedures, and/or online task support systems.

One idea is to design a best practice repository that other people can access easily. You don't want that valuable information to be buried in a file cabinet that no one knows anything about. The repository could be on a website, in a database, on an intranet, or another highly visible location.

Best practice repositories can substantially reduce the negative effects of attrition on the company's intellectual assets, which can be devastating. When people leave because they quit, retire, are laid off, or were simply temporary contractors to begin with, the company's "brain trust" completely vanishes out the door with them unless their knowledge is being captured and made available to others.

In conclusion, by capturing 20:20 hindsight incrementally and turning it into 20:20 foresight, you will achieve far greater long-term success than by blissfully ignoring or forgetting problems, or by simply moving on when a project or endeavour ends.

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