

## LEARNING TO DO PROJECT LEARNINGS BETTER

One of the fundamental principles of project management is capturing project learnings to help drive a culture of continuous improvement and avoid repeating issues that impacted prior endeavours. After all, projects always involve uncertainty as they are about changing things presumably for the better. And one of the first steps when starting a new project is reviewing previous lessons learnt.

Yet the reality is, certainly in my years of experience working with many organisations, the actual practice of capturing project learnings typically ranges from sporadic to non-existent. This is despite the fact so many people working on projects say it's so important. And I'm talking project team members here that are frustrated to embark on another project they are expected yet again to deliver with insufficient resources and in a compressed timeframe, not trained project managers.

Fundamentally, the process of capturing learnings is often of limited interest to people who are under pressure to drive progress and who, when a project completes, are typically already working on the next set of projects. After all, it's tricky to look in the rear-view mirror when driving at top speed and navigating the traffic in front of you. And when you know very few people actually consult prior lessons learned, it's not exactly motivating to spend time doing something that will never see the light of day.

However, given the power of AI, having a repository of lessons learned is all the more valuable, hence why organisations should be thinking harder about how to ensure valuable information can be referenced for future use.

So here are some of my thoughts on how to improve the capturing of lessons for everyone's benefit:

1. **Make it valued by leadership.** Where time is limited, people focus their efforts on what is valued and what gets noticed. If lessons learned are not truly valued by the business leadership, then why bother. So, if lessons learned aren't being captured in your organisation, have a think about whether the business leadership actually value this and what signals they are giving the organisation to show whether they do or don't actually value this.

***RECOMMENDATION:** Incorporate a quarterly review of lessons learned into business governance cycles. By clearly demonstrating leadership will take the time to review lessons learned and there is a requirement to have lessons learned to review, teams will take action to ensure they are not caught lacking when it comes to the review. Or if they are, they are unlikely to be caught lacking next time round if the leadership team make the point.*

2. **Make it value-add.** Business leadership teams invariably focus on what needs to get done in the organisation to deliver the results required. And it's all too easy to be head-down in operational metrics or strategizing. There will be an implicit expectation from business leadership that lessons learned are being captured and integrated. However, if lessons are not being captured or if they are yet are not considered of appropriate value, then you enter a vicious cycle of nether those capturing the lessons and those needing the lessons captured feeling like it is a worthwhile use of time.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Ensure lessons learned are at the right level. Invariably a lesson learned can be detailed and therefore can be considered too specific at a macro level. The key here is understanding how to categorise lessons learned in your organisation and see deeper than surface level as to why something happened. Taking the principles of root cause analysis and asking “why” at each level will invariably identify the root cause at a macro or organisational level. And understanding the macro root causes are invaluable to the success and longevity of an organisation. Oftentimes the true root causes are cultural and will point back to how the business is being run / led.*

3. **Build it into your processes.** If lessons learned are expected by the organisation at a quarterly level and part of a project initiation cycle, they will need to be captured. So build this into your business and project processes and pay more than lip-service to this.

**RECOMMENDATION:** *At the start of a project ensure there is active evidence of prior lessons learned having been considered in your project initiation documentation. Factor in quarterly lessons learned reviews for projects that are 6-months or more in duration, in incorporate lessons learned to date in governance reviews at appropriate intervals. And at project close-out, ensure a project close-out report is captured that incorporates key lessons learned. And ensure this close-out report is reviewed and acknowledged by the appropriate business leadership level. And given by the time a project close-out comes around, it can be very hard to get these scheduled in, so if the project is big enough, make the lessons learned part of a ‘project wrap’ that incorporates a level of celebration, reward and recognition, and ideally get people to provide input ahead of the event using your lessons learned capture form.*

4. **Make it easy.** Like anything in life, the easier something is to do, the more likely it is to happen. So take away the barriers and reasons why not to do it. With Project & Portfolio Management (PPM) and collaboration platforms, this has never been easier. At Productive, we use Smartsheet as our platform of choice for PPM, and so have developed a very simple way for people to capture project-related learnings that go into a central lessons learned repository so they can be reviewed at a macro or micro level, by theme, category, project and summarised using AI. And, it makes it very easy to monitor who is or is not capturing lessons learned, who often (or infrequently) they are being recorded, and then take action accordingly to help drive a culture of continuous learning

**RECOMMENDATION:** *Set up a central lessons learned repository that all project, programme or general lessons automatically get captured in via a simple online submission form that is made available to all via project dashboards and other project information. And if you don’t have one, download our free Lessons Learned Smartsheet template that can be incorporated into your PPM set-up. And if you don’t have Smartsheet, maybe it’s time you had a chat with us to find out more. And if you don’t like talking, then register for a [30-day free trial](#) and download our [Simple PMO template](#) set and incorporate the free Lessons Learned sheet into that and then get in touch when you realise how this will revolutionise how you manage projects in your organisation. **Time to embrace Modern Project Management.***

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