



TenStep Supplemental Paper

19 July 2003

Hold a Project Conclusion Meeting to Provide Key Learnings for Your Next Project

By definition, all projects end at some point. Some may be very long and it might seem that they will never end, but they always do. Two fundamental characteristics of a project are that they must always have a start and an end.

There are a number of things that should happen as the project is nearing completion, or very soon after the official end date. These can vary depending on the project and the standard processes of your organization. It is the responsibility of the project manager to build project termination activities into the project workplan. These should be seen as vital parts of the project, not an afterthought as the team is getting disbanded. Some of the activities to consider at the end of a project include:

- Declaring success or failure
- Transitioning the solution to support
- Archiving the project files
- Conducting performance reviews
- Reassigning of the remaining project team members
- Hold project conclusion meeting

The project conclusion meeting is a time to reflect on the project just completed and see what things can be learned that will help the team members and other project teams in the future.

The Project Conclusion Meeting

It is a good practice to start your project off with a formal kickoff meeting to signify that the initiative has officially started. Likewise, the project should officially end with a project conclusion meeting. If the project had major problems, or if the project was cancelled, sometimes these are called project post-mortems. There is a value to be gained from this meeting, whether the project was a success or failure (or something in between).

There are a number of ways to plan the meeting so that it is as effective as possible. These include:

- **Using an outside facilitator.** Many times the group is more comfortable if there is a meeting facilitator from outside the team. This is especially true if the project experienced problems. You can get a more truthful discussion if the facilitator does not have a stake in the outcome.
- **Make sure everyone knows the purpose of the meeting.** This can be communicated clearly ahead of time to all of the participants.



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- **Send out an agenda ahead of time.** Your time will be better spent during the meeting if everyone is prepared ahead of time and knows what the discussion topics are.

Everyone needs to perceive that they are all there to learn both individually and collectively. This meeting is not a performance review! All participants need to feel safe to expose what they did and thought so that they can learn how to be more effective in the future.

Focus First on What Actually Happened Versus What Was Expected

You won't discover what to improve unless you know what you achieved and did not achieve versus what you originally wanted. First, have a frank discussion to list the things that should have happened on the project. For each statement, add a corresponding statement regarding what actually happened. You are not only looking for problems. If there are important events that actually happened as planned, note them as well.

If the project had problems, it's easy for the discussion to start to get negative. However, try to keep the discussion positive. Even if the comments come out in a negative fashion, they can usually be crafted into a positive statement. For instance, a negative statement might be "The team never accomplished anything when Sam was a part of the meeting." A more positive statement could be "We had a hard-time focusing in team meetings." This reflects the outcome and does not make any judgments as to whether Sam was a problem.

If different people have differing views of what happened on the project, try to find common ground for consensus. Remember there is not necessarily a right or wrong. We are trying to gather perceptions. It will help if people focus on the things they actually participated in, rather than guessing about things they were not involved in.

Ask Why

After you list what actually happened on the project, prioritize a smaller number of important areas to focus on further. For each of the remaining items, start asking why things turned out as they did. Again, in some cases, you may be focusing on areas that did turn out as you expected. There can be important learning from these events as well.

Lessons Learned for Future Projects

To really be effective, the prior discussion now needs to be translated into general observations and key learnings that the group can use as lessons for the future. The unique set of circumstances that caused events to happen as they did on your project may not occur again. However, the team should be able to generalize what happened on this project into a set of lessons that can be applied to many projects in the future. These lessons learned should be documented formally and distributed back to all team members. If you have a group (such as a PMO) that keeps a repository of project lessons learned, these insights should be forwarded there as well.

As "lessons learned," the insights are of most interest to the project participants and to others who embark on similar projects in the future. As the PMO receives many sets of



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"lessons learned," the PMO may also be able to come up with a smaller list of organizational "best practices" that will be of help to all projects in the future.

Summary

The end of project meeting is a great opportunity to formally wrap up the project. In addition to signaling that the project is completed, it is also a time to reflect back and see what lessons can be learned for the future. You don't want to discuss lessons learned right away. Instead, describe what you wanted to happen, what actually happened, and why. Then you have the context to start talking about what lessons you can take forward. The project team can internalize the lessons learned and apply them to future projects. The lessons learned from all projects can also be consolidated on an organization level to develop a smaller number of best practices that can be applied to all projects. This allows the entire organization to take advantage of these common lessons as well.