

Global Project Strategy (011) (603) 862-3374

Organizations don't encourage Post-Mortems and in doing so ignore a valuable learning Opportunity

Why Post-Mortems Don't Work

Once a project is completed it makes good sense to sit down with project constituents and talk about what went wrong and what went right. It's an opportunity to learn from our mistakes. To do better in skiing tennis or golf, most people will accept that a good coach can pinpoint bad habits and with the proper coaching improve their performance.

While most of us agree that post-mortems can

help improve the project management process, it usually doesn't happen.

Four things get in the way. The first is time; seldom is it available. Instead project managers are under pressure to move to the next project.

The second is organizational emphasis. In a study conducted by Russo and Shoemaker (Decision Traps) they found that managers spend very little time

trying to learn from their mistakes. For most, it is not seen as an important activity.

The third is the reward system. Very simply, organizations reward success and punish failure. So who would want to spend time talking about what didn't work or what failed? Not many!

The fourth reason is the unwillingness of some to speak up.
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Don't Collect Too Much Data

While collecting too little data to support project decisions is risky, collecting too much data can waste time and even lead a project astray.

Suppose we are collecting data to determine where to locate a fast food franchise. We could collect data on traffic flow, population density, neighboring restaurants, per capita income, age, and even education levels. But many studies have shown that too much data leads to information overload. In this case we may only need population

density and the location of neighboring fast food chains.

As you collect too much data you may be confronted with another problem. With a wide range of responses several different points-of-view can be supported.

And here's the real problem. At some point the insistence that more and more data need be collected is itself a sign of resistance to change. The insistence that more data be collected may serve to postpone decision-

making and subsequent action. It may be the perfect tool for procrastination! Instead, project managers need to recognize when enough data has been collected. They know that a problem can be uncovered by looking at it from many different directions and that is unnecessary to explore each one of them.

Lesson Learned: the real object is not the data itself but identifying and solving the problem.

Collecting too much data can have as many consequences as collecting too little data.

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Post Mortems Don't WorkContinued

Let me tell you about a post-mortem session at large organization. The project had been completed and the results were mixed. A post-mortem was scheduled

The afternoon of the session the project manager was ready. Flip charts were taped to the wall, note-takers were appointed, small groups were identified.

Constituents were forthcoming with their praise and concerns and

at the end of the session, when the small groups reported back to the group-as-a-whole, a treasure-trove of data became available.

After an initial discussion it became apparent that several problems needed to be addressed. Few, however, were willing to take responsibility for the problems.

Instead, they pointed the finger elsewhere.

As is true in most

situations like this blame is projected onto others but when the project is successful the credit is focused inward. As a result, little learning that takes place.

Lesson Learned: Post-Mortems only work when the culture doesn't publicly punish failure. When the culture emphasizes learning and improvement then, and only then, can a post-mortem work.

Nokia Outsources Creative Projects

Nokia has not done well in the US market, yet all eyes are on new products due very soon.

While most companies keep new product development in-house and use consumer focus groups to evaluate new ideas, Nokia has taken a different road. They invited customers in Mumbai, Rio de Janeiro and Accra to submit their

own designs for new cell phones. But they didn't stop there. In March 2007 Nokia posted a mobile application called Sports Tracker on a company web site, open to the public. This software, relying on Global Positioning Software, found imaginative uses beyond the company's expectations.

What is really interesting

to us in Project Management is that even such areas as product design are candidates for outsourcing. But of even more significance is that Nokia provides us with an example of the new paradigm in project management, where customers (and suppliers) become partners in project development and management process.

May Challenge

On my recent trip to China I took this photo. Can you identify the process?

- a) Sheet rolling
- b) Beverage bottling
- c) Photo processing
- d) Spray painting
- e) Printing

First five correct answers win a T shirt.

