

The Closeout Phase

Learning Lessons from Projects

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Winston Churchill noted that those who do not study history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. The same is true for organizations that do not learn from past experiences. They will absolutely repeat blunders they have made before (Pinto 1998). The closeout phase is the very important last step of the project lifecycle that is intended to improve the process for future projects and prevent blunders from recurring repeatedly.

This phase allots time to finish any remaining open items, tie up loose ends, and reflect upon the overall progress of the project. It determines whether the project achieved its intended purpose and goals. It also measures key project performance criteria established by the charter (cost, time, scope, and quality), yields a list of improvements that should be considered when starting future projects, and delivers a final report formalizing findings and outlining actions needed to ensure success in the future.

“No one remembers an effective start-up, but everyone remembers an ineffective closeout; the consequences are felt for a long time.” (Frigenti and Comminos 2002)

When the effort applied to the closeout phase is compared to the Define, Plan, and Execute phases of a project, it hardly gets a cursory glance in most cases (Heldman 2005). The closeout process is frequently rushed, impaired, or even omitted completely from many projects. This is unfortunate, as project closeouts are an essential part of successful projects. Messy closeouts can cause the end user to question the competency of the team, lead the management to think that the entire project ran as badly as the closeout, and most unfortunately prevent the organization from learning from its failures (and hopefully successes) (Pinto 1998).

A good closeout allows the team to wrap up the project in a controlled fashion. The use of systematic reviews reduce the likelihood of mistakes and ensure project records will be properly maintained and archived (Pinto 1998). The project ends with a mutual approval of the end result by team members, stakeholders, management and the user. Good closeouts also allow time for the team to reflect upon the entire process and determine what went well, what did not, and what could be improved in the future.

The lack of attention to the closeout phase can be attributed to both the team and the organization. Teams often fall apart at the end of the Execution phase because many members are either disinterested or reassigned to other projects as soon as the required deliverables are complete (Taylor 2006), making them unavailable (or unwilling) to participate in post-project discussions. Organizations themselves can thwart the review process by refusing to allow the time or spend the money needed for success (Ewusi-Mensah 2003). Unfortunately, omitting or inadequately utilizing the closeout phase robs the organization of insight needed to understand the overall successes (or failures) of a project and how to create a better process in the future

The most useful component of the closeout phase is the post-implementation review (commonly known as a post-mortem). This review process is the tool that can be used to establish whether the project met its proposed objectives, as well as determine what went well and what did not during the preceding phases of the project. The post-mortem should be treated similar to a final audit of the project and its processes (Taylor 2006). It is a deliberate fact finding process that attempts to uncover the root causes of both failures and successes within the project lifecycle (Ewusi-Mensah 2003). Due to the individual nature of projects, the review process cannot be a universal process but similarly common aspects of projects are often considered. Some examples are:

- Change control (*implementation, handling, managing, etc*)
- Communication (*within team, team to project leader, team to stakeholders, etc*)
- Decision Making (*timing, informed, acceptance of decision by team, etc*)
- Documentation of work (*defined, adequate, complete, archived, etc*)
- Initial plans, budget, and schedules (*accuracy, conveyed to team, followed, etc*)
- Mistakes (*root cause, corrective action, fallout, etc*)
- Project definition and planning (*scope, deliverables, resources, etc*)
- Project performance (*met schedule, resource use, budget, deliverables, etc*)
- Risks (*taken, averted, or dealt with, responses to, etc*)
- Successes (*benefits, reasons for occurrence, individuals responsible, etc*)
- Team dynamics (*teamwork, handoffs, communication, efficiency, etc*)

The process of analyzing the above aspects and determining “what worked well,” “what did not work” and “what could have been done better” (Frigenti and Comminos 2002) can be led by either the project manager or an independent auditor. Each will generate valuable feedback if the process is performed successfully and tactfully. The manner in which a post-mortem is managed will greatly affect the reliability and accuracy of the information generated. The post-mortem must always remain an honest attempt to uncover problems and successes within the project (Ewusi-Mensah 2003). Placing blame and creating scapegoats are the worst possible occurrences that can happen during a review. Not only does it hurt feelings of the recipients; it can lower the team performance and create an atmosphere of bitterness and betrayal. An effective post-mortem leader will curb this behavior before it reaches this extreme, by setting meeting ground rules and enforcing them throughout the process. They should also deflect any finger pointing from individuals onto the processes that allowed the issues to occur.

Using an independent auditor can be a good way to gather unbiased opinions about the successes and failures within a project. Considering the post-mortem to be an audit implies that a disciplined approach will be used to look at every aspect of the project. Auditors should come into their role without first hand knowledge of the project. In order to be successful, they will need to solicit information from the team members in some fashion. One common way of gaining information is to require individual team members to answer questionnaires (to gather opinions and perspectives about the project) and another is through one-on-one interviews (to get qualitative, in-depth information about the major events within a project). Whichever information gathering method used (or perhaps both), the results should be compared to the actual project data in order to reconnect the facts of what was done with the opinions of the team members (Ewusi-Mensah 2003). The result of an audit of this nature is generally a list of issues that the project manager can use when writing the final report.

The post-mortem, when led by the project manager, has a much different atmosphere than one led by an outside auditor. It is often performed in a group setting, which promotes good dialog regarding the issues of the project, but it can also turn into a finger pointing session rather quickly. Like the formal audit, it is beneficial to preclude the session with some sort of questionnaire to spur thoughts about the project progress. Thinking about the different aspects of the project before attending the post-mortem session should help promote meaningful and well thought discussions of specific issues and successes. Unlike the

previous example where the team members were essentially data resources, in this environment the team is very much involved in developing the list of lessons learned and can directly influence recommendations to streamline the project process in the future.

“Good project management systems have a memory, the embodiment of this memory is the Project Final Report. The final report is not another evaluation; rather it is the history of the project. It is a chronicle of the life and times of the project, a compendium of what went right and what went wrong, of who served the project in what capacity, of what was done to create a substance of the project, of how it was managed.” (Frigenti and Comminos 2002)

The project final report is the final deliverable of a project. It is a formal document that compares what was expected from the project to what was actually delivered. The project final report also formally identifies areas of success and weakness, and recommends changes to existing policies (or the creation of new ones) to incorporate the lesson's learned established by the post-mortem into standard practice. Without the final report, results of the closeout phase are merely lists of successes and failures without any associated actions.

Distributing the final report to pertinent players is a common approach to information sharing, but its flaw is that it depends on the recipient to read, then interpret, and then take action. If the recipient does not have the time or inclination to review them seriously, at best the results will be mediocre and worst case is that the report goes unread (Pinto 1998). A better way to ensure that history does not repeat itself is to immediately incorporate key improvements into an organization's standard business practices just as documented in the final report. The pertinent players will be more likely to react to a change of this magnitude and seek to understand the reasoning and benefits. If change to the business practice is unachievable, at the very least share relevant lessons learned at the kickoff meeting of new projects (Pinto 1998). Even if recommendations are not formally adopted into standard practice, individuals who actively participated in the post-mortem will still help contribute to better execution of future projects. They will have a better understanding of past successes and failures and should help guide successful projects in the future.

Because of its affect on future projects, completion of the project closeout phase cannot be stressed enough. When done correctly, the benefits are a successful project ending, improved project processes and team members with a better understanding of what good projects should entail. Project closeouts are essential for project success; organizations need to ensure they push their project teams to correctly utilize this final stage or projects will continue to repeat the same mistakes.

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