



The Value of a Post Project Review

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The one constant in life is change. In the business world, change tends to manifest itself in projects to accomplish a variety of goals and tasks. In the course of many years of business experience, I have been witness to and participant in projects both large and small, both fabulous successes and abject failures.

The tendency I have observed is for successes to be celebrated and failures swept under the rug. I view both actions as serious mistakes, or at least opportunities lost. There is significant value in taking the time to review projects, both the successes and failures, in the interests of learning. What makes a great project great? More importantly, how can that "greatness" be repeated? What makes a project fail and how could that failure have been avoided? A thorough "post mortem" can yield some valuable information which can be applied to future efforts.

Late in the movie "Top Gun", the main character, Maverick, is seen walking along the beach with his commanding officer, seeking his advice. His CO, call sign Viper, says, "A good pilot is compelled to always evaluate what's happened, so he can apply what he's learned." In fact, this tendency of pilots is not just a movie plot line. The publication *AOPA Pilot*, read avidly by pilots professional and private, has a regular column entitled "Never Again". In this column, pilots describe a real situation and how they dealt with it. Their purpose is to share what they have learned with their fellow pilots. Such lessons for a pilot can help in what can be life and death situations, in many cases ensuring that the result is life. There are similar columns in publications for law enforcement professionals.

In the business world, we are seldom talking about situations affecting the life or death of people, but we may be addressing the success or failure of a company. I am sure the employees of that company view their jobs as being akin to a life and death situation, at least for them. So, like Maverick in Top Gun, a good company is compelled to review its projects, determine what went well and what didn't, and apply what they learn to future actions.

Most executives and managers are fairly quick to look at projects that fail, but may do so with the wrong mind set. They tend to focus on laying blame and firing the guilty. Whereas there may be a real need to

do just that, I suggest that there is greater value in looking beyond simple blame and taking a deeper look. Focus on learning, not blaming.

I also believe that a real opportunity is missed in not reviewing successful projects. There is huge value in making success a repeatable process! Let me cite a personal example.

In a previous job, I participated in a major computer application rollout for a large, locally headquartered company. My role was as the vendor tasked with helping my customer apply the resources of his own company and mine in order to implement a complex Information Technology (IT) product set we had sold to them. They were deploying these products across a very large, national network. The deployment was a huge undertaking and a resounding success. We spent time afterwards discussing what was done right and why everything went so well. In essence, this customer was a shining example of how to install and roll out a complex application right. When asked, they could articulate very clearly why they felt their project went well. And they did articulate it, to large gatherings of my company's employees as well as to many of our other customers and prospects.

So, what did they do right? Well, here is my version of their list.

1. They laid out their project, which was extremely large and ambitious, in phases. This made the project more manageable and allowed for more reasonable goals and a number of smaller and quicker successes. Success tends to beget more success. They also realized some measurable value from each phase of the project.
2. They guarded against what they called "scope creep". This avoided pushing results out to infinity, the infamous never-ending project.
3. They ensured commitment to the project at all levels. As they began initially, they made sure that their top executives were supportive of this IT endeavor. As they got the project going, they focused on informing and educating the "troops" at all levels. Thus, people weren't surprised. Rather, they were able to "buy in" to the project, and not feel forced to accept a major change.
4. They put the right resources into the project up front. In other words, they acknowledged that, like most IT projects, the cost of the software itself is only a small part of what is required to be successful. They hired the additional skilled staff they would need, ensured that all members of the project received the appropriate training, and they bolstered their forces appropriately with highly skilled consultants.
5. They hired a superb project manager, and gave him the support he needed. Management in general and project management specifically are skills that are frequently undervalued because they can be harder to understand and quantify. An effective team leader and project manager is invaluable!! I cannot overemphasize this point.

This project became an example for us, one that gained our customer's IT staff stature among its peers, and also gave us a shining success to use as an example to other customers and prospects. And, of course, our customer, being fully cognizant of their value to us, was able to get our assistance very readily. That never hurts. Overall, it was a great joint effort.

Let me summarize. To ensure a successful project, first plan carefully. Spending time here will make the actual "doing" a relative snap. Gather your team, train them appropriately, and make sure all parties who will be affected by the project are informed. Execute the project. Then, take the time to review and evaluate afterwards and learn for future projects. Finally, celebrate each great success.

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