

THE VALUE OF LESSONS LEARNED: THE ART OF GOOD PROJECT CLOSURE

Either you have been missing something, or nothing has really been going on

'As we know, there are known knowns; There are things we know we know

We also know there are known unknowns: That is to say we know there are some things we do not know

But there are also unknown unknowns: The ones we don't know we don't know'

Donald Rumsfeld (Department of Defence news briefing).

That is one crazy set of words but actually there is a lot of sense in the whole thing. Here you are at the end of the project. It has been a success or, at the very least, is has not been a complete failure, and you are about to head off to the next project. But wait, do you really honestly know everything? Do you know what you don't know? Well of course you don't, you can't possibly. So don't fool yourself that you do!

So what do you do about it? Well what you do about it is to do something about it – now is the time to conduct a retrospective of your project, a review, a considered and open activity that will allow you the opportunity to learn what it is you don't yet know.

Just as at the start of the project, remember 'a brand shiny new project... at a point in time that is full of peace and love and general wellbeing between all parties involved', well the end of the project is a special time as well. It is a time when project team members are far more likely to talk to you openly, equally and honestly. Therefore it is a time you should really focus some effort on to learn how to be more effective (and even more 'Productively Lazy') next time around.

Applying the ‘Productive Lazy’ approach

Finish what you started

As the Mastermind¹ question master says, ‘I’ve started and so I will finish’, and you should make sure that you do the same. Finish the project in a correct and complete manner. Avoid all of those normal pressures and temptations to head off on the next juicy project that is calling you to.

Make the very most of this second opportunity of peace, love and harmony (hopefully) and learn everything that you can learn. It will be worth it I guarantee.

Know what you know

Start first with yourself. What do you ‘know’ about the project? Well a whole bunch of stuff that’s for sure, but what focus less on what you already knew at the start of the project and think more about what you have learnt new during the project.

Much of what happened will have been processed, dealt with, handled through the reapplication of past experience or knowledge, but some will have not. You learn through each project, so consider what it is that you learnt this time.

Now you know what you know and probably also know what you don’t know, gaps in your experience on the project, questions you can ask your team.

Find out what you don’t know

Now focus on the unknown unknowns

The ideal way to do this is to conduct a full retrospective, if you can’t do this then at least gather input from key members of your project team. One the best reference books for this Project Retrospectives by Norman L. Kerth (see references). I love the prime directive that Kerth governs his retrospectives by; Regardless of what we discover, we must understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job he or she could, given what was known at the time, his or her skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.

¹ Mastermind is a British quiz show, well-known for its challenging questions, intimidating setting and air of seriousness. The basic format of Mastermind has never changed — four contestants face two rounds, one on a specialised subject of the contestant’s choice, the other a general knowledge round.

There are treasures out there, not one person knows all there is to know about the project, and certainly not you the project manager (you don't honestly think your team told you everything that went on do you?).

So go gold mining, there are nuggets of gold in 'lessons learned' or at least lessons to be learned if only we pay attention. At least one of your project team will tell you something that will aid you in the future, and let you be a little more productively lazy. And the best way to make this happen is to plan for it to happen, right back at the 'thick' front-end of the project, back at the very beginning.

Ask what you now need to know

As part of this retrospective process make sure that you also take the opportunity to ask questions that you want answering. Remember? The things that you know what you don't know, the gaps in your experience on the project, the questions should ask your team.

Complete your knowledge by having an open and honest dialogue with the team. It may surprise them what you don't know, and they will most doubt be pleased that they were able to help out during the project.

Learn the lessons to be learned

OK, now let's sum all this up. Carefully and slowly.

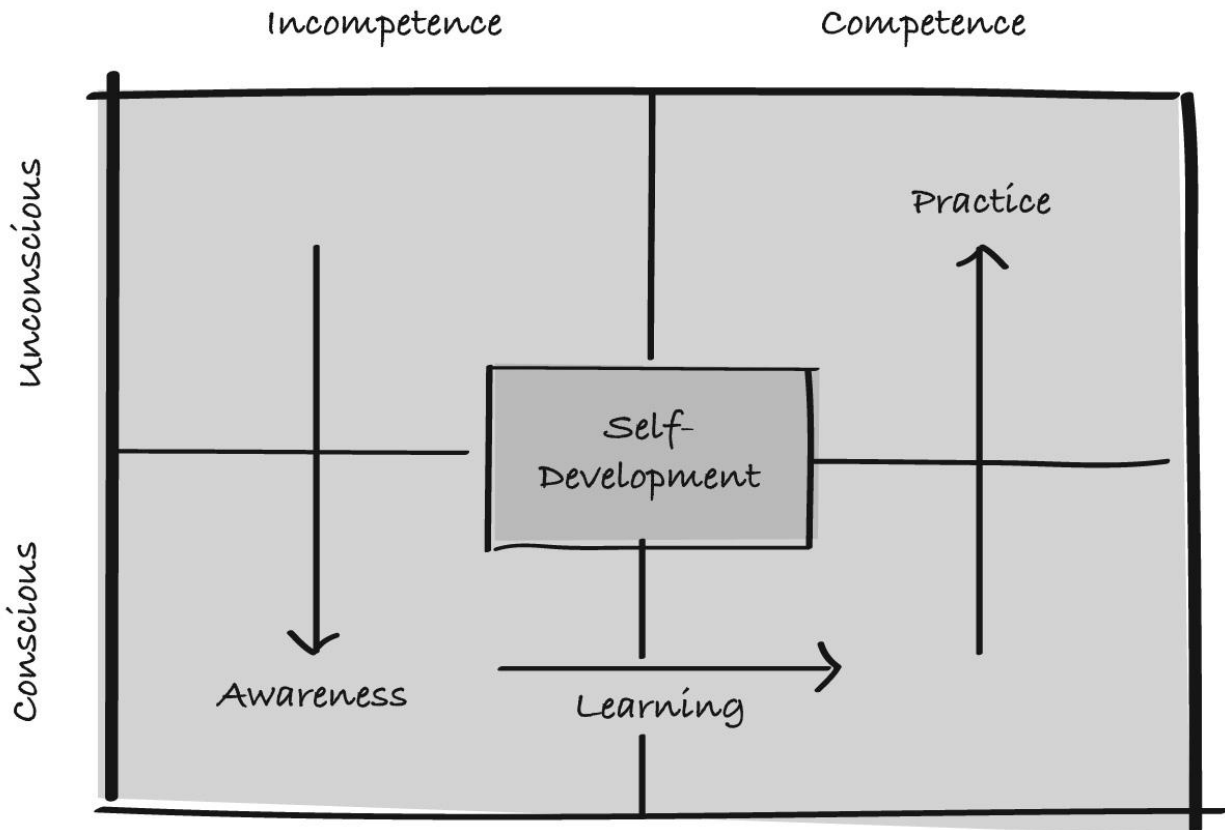
- You know what you know.
- You also know what you don't know – and received answers on the gaps in your knowledge hopefully.
- You now know what you didn't know you knew, through feedback from the team, and other sources.
- And, through the retrospective you at least know a little more about what you didn't know that you didn't know – if the team have been very open with you.

Simple isn't it?

Tell others what you now know

And finally, don't just sit on that knowledge. Share it out amongst everyone that could benefit from it.

Lessons learned should be lessons shared, so don't be mean, share it out!



The grid of self-development logic.

All the above can be summarised in this diagram. To move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence, not knowing what you don't know and just not caring, you need awareness – the retrospective can aid this awareness.

To move from conscious incompetence to conscious competence, knowing what you don't know but caring about that fact – again the retrospective can aid along with a learning plan based on the outputs.

And finally, to move from conscious competence to unconscious competence – well just requires a lot of practice, so get to it!

A project manager's tale of escape without cause

A story, and yes, I am the project manager in question, much to my shame.

For the most part I have really enjoyed all of my projects. That is not to say that there haven't been challenges over the years; high points and low points, moments when I felt that I had had enough but equally good moments that I wanted to never end.

This tale is of a project within a manufacturing company that had a lot more low points than high points.

The project was 'challenging' (and it seemed close to impossible at times), the steering committee were 'difficult (to say the least), the project team were 'mixed' in their interest and capability (to put it mildly), and I was a long way from home. The entire experience really tested me as a project manager pretty much from day one, but I felt that I had acquitted myself in a good way. In a good way until the very end of the project that is.

So, to quickly move to the point of this story, the project reached a conclusion. The deliverables were delivered and the company reluctantly agreed to signing off the project. The job was done.

Except it wasn't.

I had had quite a hellish experience over the months and just wanted it all to come to an end. And so, when that final steering committee meeting was done and the minutes signed off, I have to admit that I almost ran to my car, jumped in and tore out of the car park deliriously happy. The motorway home called to me and, with some rock music blaring out of the speakers, I decided to right this one off to history and to never return again.

I was one happy project manager.

Then I was asked to go back and to a post-project review!

My heart sank and I began to make up 101 reasons why I was too busy, too sick, too mentally incompetent, too 'about to go on a spontaneous holiday', and too 'I just don't want to go back', in order to, well, avoid going back.

I didn't go back. Someone else did.

And so that was that.

Except it wasn't. My inquisitiveness eventually got the better of me and I sat down with the other project manager, sometime after the review, and I discovered many things that I had never known about my own project.

I discovered (obviously through this other project manager) that the company had had a very bad experience in a similar previous project and, as a result, they were nervous about this project, very nervous indeed.

I discovered that the project had been strongly championed by one of the steering members despite a lot of resistance from others in the business and a lot, their reputation and possibly career for example, depended upon a successful outcome.

I discovered that two people on the project team had, shall we say, personal 'issues' during the early part of the project and this led to some residual tension between them.

I discovered that there was felt to be a 'black hole' in one particular business area where the purpose and benefit, the justification, of the project was never explained.

I discovered that they thought that I was a very strong and competent project manager, but one that focused perhaps not enough on the human side of the project.

And I personally discovered, and I did not have to be told this by my project management colleague, that I had missed a great deal by leaving the project before its final conclusion.

I personally discovered that I should have stayed for the full and proper closure, I would have learnt so much.

A final comment

These days I always try to complete some form of project retrospective, however light, whatever is practical – the benefits are many (and they can be a great deal of fun as well).

'Progress isn't made by early risers. It's made by lazy men trying to find easier ways to do something.' Robert Heinlein (1907 - 1988)

PROFESSIONAL PROFILE



Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', Peter Taylor is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers: currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions. He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach and he is a professional speaker with City Speakers International.

He is also the author of 'The Lazy Project Manager' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - www.thelazyprojectmanager.com - you can also subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).