

YOUR MOST IMPORTANT PROJECT MEETING

Hold a Lessons-Learned meeting at the end of each project

by David Whitemyer, AIA

Every A/E project should end with a Lessons-Learned meeting. What went right? What went wrong? What could've been done better? And what should you and your team do next time?

Your meeting doesn't need to last longer than an hour, if it's well run. Here are some tips for conducting a valuable Lessons-Learned meeting, and at the bottom of this article there's information about how you can get a copy of PSMJ's Lessons-Learned meeting template.

1. Include Everyone

A Lessons-Learned meeting won't be valuable if the only participants are senior-level team members pontificating about the process. You need to include the folks from the trenches, who did a lot of the work, collaborated with each other and your subs, and work under your direction.

If they're willing, invite your key subconsultants to this meeting. They'll likely have input or information about the client of which you weren't aware, and they may have honest, unbiased suggestions for how your team and firm can improve the project process.

2. Discuss Successes and Failures

Many business coaches would suggest focusing primarily on your team's and the project's strengths. There's a perception that a focus on failure is overly negative, but this is just post-1980s self-esteem hogwash. We learn from failure. We learn from knowing when we failed, why we failed, and how not to repeat the failure. Remember what Thomas Edison said? "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Discuss both the project's success and failures. There's equal lessons to be learned from both. When identifying them, be specific about what went right or wrong, and then determine what your lesson learned is – How can you repeat (or not) this on the next project?

3. Don't Get Personal

Although you want team members to speak openly and honestly, you'll still need to set some ground rules. No one should be individually called out for fault, or even for a success. Your project was a team effort, and this Lessons-Learned meeting will fall apart into uselessness as soon as people feel targeted and defensive.

4. Don't Worry About Consensus

As with number 2 above, this rubs against the grain of contemporary workplace philosophy. Your Lessons-Learned meeting should give everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard, but not everyone's input is going to be valuable or even right.

As the project manager and facilitator of the Lessons-Learned meeting, it's your job to determine and document what you think are the important lessons and valuable action items.

5. Clarify the Action Items

No meeting should end without clear action items, and certainly not this one. If the goal of this meeting is to determine what lessons were learned during your last project, then what do you want your team members to DO with that information once the meeting is adjourned?

6. Share Your Results

Everyone in your firm can benefit from hearing about what you and your team learned during a project. Distribute copies of your meeting notes to the other project managers and to your firm leaders. You may even suggest that a few of the items be discussed at the next all-office gathering or senior staff meeting.

Not project is going to run perfectly, but every project can be better than the last if you and your team members are learning from what went right and what went wrong. If you would like a copy of PSMJ's simple 3-page Lessons-Learned meeting template, send an email to editor@psmj.com with your request. ●



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Selecting The Best Communication Medium (Continued from page 4)

Memo or E-mail

Advantages:

- E-mail is fast and convenient
- Both provide a written record
- Can be referred to after the fact

Disadvantages:

- Not good for back and forth exchange
- Subject to audit and discovery
- Usually very impersonal
- Can't verify if information was received

The method that you chose should fit the need of the project at the time. With meetings remember the cost; with the phone remember you will not always have a record of the discussion, and points can be forgotten; with e-mail or a memo, remember that you are building a legal case.

No matter what method, be professional. ●