

Project Management Home Truth Series part 5

Home Truth No 5: Post Implementation Review Reports - If you do what you always do, you'll get what you always get.....

The objective of completing a post completion report is twofold: firstly, to institutionalise the discipline of reviewing the actual outcomes of a project against the outcomes expected at its inception; and secondly, to learn and share those lessons learnt with the business to build on the successes and avoid making the same mistakes twice.

A bit of discipline and leadership is needed if you want to create a 'learning' rather than simply a 'doing' organisation. Projects should not be signed off as complete and formally closed until the post implementation review has been signed off by the senior sponsor. Making this the last milestone of the project helps prevent people falling in to the trap of thinking that a post implementation review is somehow an optional, low priority activity and that fights for time in busy diaries and usually loses. Of course, for an ill conceived, poorly managed, failed project, especially those where reputations are at stake, one can understand the human desire to move on as quickly as possible but this should be resisted otherwise no lessons are learned and the underlying issues will be once more buried ready to surface for the next project.

A post-implementation review is not always a singular 'event' and can be done at different points in the project journey:

- When the last significant milestone is passed then this is a good time to do a review as the project journey is still fresh in the minds of the project team. This review should focus on the project methods and approach used, the performance of the team leader and individual team members and aim to tease out lessons that can be shared with the business.

- Between 3 and 12 months after completion of the last significant milestone. This review should focus on actual results delivered in the sober light of real experience.

One myth that needs shattering from the outset is that it is time consuming and painful to do a post implementation review. Judged in relation to the overall hours spent delivering the project it can often work out at less than 1% of the total time. How you do the review will dictate if it is unnecessarily painful or not. The truth can hurt but shying away from it hurts more in the long run. The 'University of Hard Knocks' can be a good university but the fees are very high!

For learning to take place, whether it is at an individual, team or organisation level, three things need to happen:

- Reality has to be in the room – team members need to recognise what was done, what was not done and what actually happened during the project journey...
- Tease out insights not just 'lists' and draw good quality conclusions that can help other projects succeed. Work out who and how to communicate these in a way that lands and has the impact they deserve. Burying them in a 'report' is probably the best way for them to be rationalised and ignored so get creative!
- Check that the lessons are being used in practice.

Going through the simple yet powerful learning cycle 'What?' ... 'So What'.... 'Now What' - is a good frame to use in the review. Other top tips for doing an effective post completion review include:

- The team that took the journey should complete the review not just the team leader;
- Adopt a "black and white" approach to focus on the actual outcomes against those specified, milestones were either hit or they were missed, the business benefits were either delivered or they were not and cost targets were hit or missed, the deliverables achieved or not, etc.

- Note any variances between actual and expected outcomes and try and work out why the gap exists;. Remember this is an exercise in understanding not blame so the why question is more useful than the who question.
- Review the entire process undertaken by the project team, from selection of people through to the final report back of their achievements and identify any lessons that can be learnt from any stage in the team's activities.
- Identify any follow up or remedial action still required and make clear the timing and who has agreed to do this work. Prepare the post implementation report, go through it with the sponsor and agree how best to communicate it across the wider business. Identify key people who need to be educated and those where communication is sufficient.
- While you should recognise and celebrate success throughout the lifetime of the project when the key milestones are met. At the end, saying genuine thanks for a job well done will help future projects gain the enthusiasm and momentum you require.

So when the project ends the project team and the business, much better for the experience, are more able and ready to ensure that future projects are set up and delivered to ensure future business success.

Now what was Home Truth 1 article about again...

Good luck with your projects.

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