

Chapter 126

Postmortem Reviews

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INTRODUCTION

Postmortem reviews are collective learning activities which can be organized for projects either when they end a phase or are terminated. The main motivation is to reflect on what happened in the project in order to improve future practice—for the individuals that have participated in the project and for the organization as a whole. Projects are the typical way of working in most knowledge-intensive organizations, and postmortems provide a possibility to learn from the projects with little effort, which makes it ideal as an initial knowledge management activity in a company.

This type of process has also been referred to as “after action reviews,” “project retrospectives,” “postmortem analysis,” “post-project review,” “project analysis review,” “quality improvement

review,” “autopsy review,” “Santayana review,” and “touch-down meetings.”

Researchers in organizational learning sometimes use the term “reflective practice,” which can be defined as “the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder on the meaning to self and others in one’s immediate environment about what has recently transpired. It illuminates what has been experienced by both self and others, providing a basis for future action” (Raelin, 2001). This involves uncovering and making explicit results of planning, observation, and achieved practice. It can lead to understanding of experiences that have been overlooked in practice.

There are a number of methods to conduct postmortems which we will describe in more detail in the following. The methods rely on collecting information from project participants either through interviews, group processes, or a meeting (preferably where participants meet physically). The outcome of a meeting is a postmortem report.

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BACKGROUND

In the knowledge creation model of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), postmortems are a combination of learning through socialization and through externalization. In listening to others you employ socialization, and in reflecting and sharing your own experience you externalize your tacit knowledge. Postmortems are also a method for leveraging knowledge from the individual level to the organizational level.

In a survey on essential practices in research and development-companies, “learning from post-project audits” are seen as one of the most promising practices that could yield competitive advantage (Menke, 1997).

A survey on post-project reviews in research and development companies show that only one out of five projects received a post-project review (Zedtwitz, 2002). Also, the reviews tend to focus on technical output and bureaucratic measurements. Process-related factors are rarely discussed.

As a knowledge management tool, postmortem reviews are simple to organize. The process focuses on dialogue and discussion, which is a central element in knowledge transfer. Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000) write:

It is quite ironic that while executives and knowledge officers persist in focusing on expensive information-technology systems, quantifiable databases, and measurement tools, one of the best means for knowledge sharing and creating knowledge already exists within their companies. We cannot emphasize enough the important part conversations play.

An example of postmortem reviews are “after action reviews” conducted by the U.S. army since after the Vietnam war, focusing on a “professional discussion of an event” to provide insight, feedback, and details about the event (Townsend & Gebhart, 1999).

Conducting Postmortem Reviews

There are several ways to perform postmortem reviews. Apple has used a method (Collier, DeMarco, & Fearey, 1996) which includes designing a project survey, collecting objective project information, conducting a debriefing meeting and a “project history day,” and finally publishing the results. At Microsoft they also put much effort into writing “postmortem reports.” These contain discussion on “what worked well in the last project, what did not work well, and what the group should do to improve in the next project” (Cusomano & Selby, 1995). The size of the resulting document is quite large: “Groups generally take three to six months to put a postmortem document together. The documents have ranged from under 10 to more than 100 pages, and have tended to grow in length.”

Kerth (2001) lists a total of 19 techniques to be used in postmortems, many focusing on creating an atmosphere for discussion in the project. Kerth recommends taking three days to discuss projects in detail. (For a more complete overview of methods and purpose of postmortem reviews, see Dingsøyr, 2005)

METHODS FOR CONDUCTING POSTMORTEM REVIEWS

Postmortems can differ in length from activities that takes weeks, to an activity that can be done as a half-day group process. In the following, we present two methods for conducting postmortems, and also present example results from one type of postmortem.

Two techniques are used in both types of postmortems: For a focused brainstorm on what happened in the project, a technique called the “KJ Method,” named after Japanese Ethnologist Jiro Kawakita (Scupin, 1997), is used. For each of these sessions, the participants are given a set of Post-It notes and asked to write one “issue”

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