

# Turning Setbacks into Strength - The Art of Lessons Learned

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Once upon a time, a new project request was registered with the Project Management Office, promising a generation of 10% boost in revenue. Everyone was excited. The standard project approval process was fast-tracked due to the promising opportunity. Everyone was eager to make this work and not to miss out on this great opportunity.

Each department quickly identified key team members, assigning a dedicated Project Manager to ensure timely project delivery.

With everyone on board and full of enthusiasm, the journey began!

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Problems began to emerge...

A steering committee was formed to discuss and resolve issues...

New issues continued to arise unexpectedly...

Pressures mounted to deliver the entire scope within the stipulated timeframes...

Individuals started spending excessive hours at work... some, on the verge of a burnout...

The planned launch date drew nearer...

The team was instructed to stick to the deadline despite the solution's lack of quality...

On the night before the deadline, it was agreed to launch the solution as is.

The solution was released.

The result: a disaster...

Solution was rolled back, with a decision not to pursue the project any further.

**Team members were asked to move to another urgent project at once.**

Unfortunately, I have witnessed this unfolding many times in my career, and I'm certain you've encountered it as well.

Success or failure, the significance of people gathering around a table at the end of a project to discuss accomplishments and shortcomings is frequently underestimated. In doing so, organisations miss the opportunity to gain valuable insights that could enhance future endeavours.

## The Nasa Challenger Disaster

The Nasa Challenger Disaster was a tragic event that occurred on January 28, 1986, where on that fateful day, seven crew members lost their lives when the Space Shuttle Challenger disintegrated just 73 seconds after liftoff.

The primary cause of this catastrophe was later attributed to the malfunction of both the primary and secondary redundant O-ring seals, which failed due to the unseasonably cold weather conditions at the time of the launch. If you want to learn more about this tragedy, I strongly recommend reading [this](#) engaging book or watching the four-episode documentary on Netflix titled the “Challenger: The Final Flight”

### Lessons Learned from This Event

Rather than rushing to the next project, NASA conducted multiple investigations aimed at uncovering the underlying causes of this tragic event. These investigations revealed several insights, including:

1. **The need for an enhanced Risk Assessment and Communication** – Engineers had expressed concerns about the O-rings' performance in cold weather based on earlier flight data. However, these concerns were either dismissed by NASA management, or they were not effectively communicated to them, leading to the ill-fated decision to proceed with the launch.
2. **Safety Culture Reinforcement** – The disaster prompted NASA to reevaluate and reinforce its safety processes, standards, and protocols, ensuring that safety takes precedence over schedule pressures (Nasa's Challenger launch faced pressure to meet deadlines primarily due to political and PR considerations).
3. **Re-evaluation of the Launch Criteria** – NASA initiated a substantial overhaul of its launch criteria, introducing several stringent controls related to weather conditions and the performance of critical components. These controls became non-negotiable prerequisites for all future launches.

All the lessons mentioned above resonate well with effective project management. For instance, these lessons highlight the critical roles that both risk assessment and open and transparent communication play in making informed decisions and effectively mitigating potential issues. Furthermore, they also underscore the importance of non-negotiable factors like quality, that should take precedence over rigid adherence to deadlines. Lastly, these lessons emphasise the significance of making ethical considerations throughout the course of the project.

## A Brief Overview of the Lessons Learned Process

### Frequency

When organisations run projects using traditional project management practice, I strongly advise project managers to record lessons as they arise, rather than deferring them to a specific ‘lessons learned’ meeting. This is to ensure that lessons are not forgotten by the time a formal session is held.

Formal lessons learned sessions should be held after completion of key project milestones, project phases, and upon the overall completion of the project. However, this depends on the length and time invested in each milestone.

## **Preparation**

To ensure stakeholder engagement while maximising time efficiency, I advise project managers to provide a lesson learned template to all stakeholders involved in the project at least a week before the meeting. However, the role of the project manager doesn't stop there. The project manager needs to take a very active role in encouraging participation, ensuring that all participants understand:

1. the purpose of this exercise, and
2. their responsibilities throughout this crucial phase of the project.

Moreover, they need to work hand-in-hand with all participants to ensure that they are well-versed in the template and all queries related to its completion are addressed prior to the meeting.

It is also advisable that ahead of the meeting, the project manager circulates the agenda, outlining the allotted time for each agenda item. An essential consideration when crafting the agenda is to allow ample time for discussion to uncover additional lessons that may not have been apparent when viewed from an individual perspective.

One key thing factor to keep in mind is that the agenda should be used as a guiding framework to ensure that nothing is overlooked. This is because the main objective of the lessons learned session is to gather as much information as possible, which is best achieved through discussions and open-ended questions, rather than adhering to a rigid agenda.

## **Execution**

The project manager plays a key role in guiding participants through each lesson learned while allowing sufficient time for discussion. Within these discussions, it is crucial that all the team identify and record the root cause of the lesson learned and potential resolutions.

At the end of the session, the project manager should guide all participants through the lessons learned and, where necessary, prioritise any identified actions during the meeting.

It is of utmost importance that these lessons are recorded in a centralised repository (such as a database), to enable knowledge sharing across the entire organisation. This will contribute to a culture of continuous improvement.

By identifying, documenting, and applying lessons learned, organisations can prevent future failures while continuously enhancing their overall project delivery. The commitment to continuous learning will ultimately help organisations to improve decision-making, enhance team collaboration, and enable them to swiftly transition into a culture of continuous improvement.

*Thoughts? [Join the conversation on LinkedIn](#)*

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## References

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## About Me



**Jonathan Spiteri**



With over 15 years of expertise, I am a highly motivated and results-driven transformation strategy expert, with a track record of defining, executing, and overseeing large-scale strategic and transformational programs, bringing changes in mindsets, innovative practices, and tools to tackle complex challenges.

Throughout my career, I've spearheaded the development and management of Strategy, Transformation, Professional Services, Project Management, and Digital offices, collaborating with Boards, C-Level Executives, and international clients. This journey involves coaching and training in Project Management and Agile methodologies for individuals with diverse skill sets.

Currently, I serve as the Vice-Chairman of the PMI Malta Steering Committee, actively contributing to establishing the first PMI Chapter in Malta.

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