

Project "Post Mortem" Review Questions

Another Project Management Tool by Michael Greer

It's important for project managers and team members to take stock at the end of a project and develop a list of lessons learned so that they don't repeat their mistakes in the next project. Typically such reviews are called post-project reviews or "post mortems." I recommend a two step process for conducting these reviews:

First, prepare and circulate a whole bunch of specific questions about the project and give team members time to think about them and prepare their responses individually.

Next, hold a meeting and discuss the team's responses to the questions. The result of this discussion is often a list of "Lessons Learned." The benefit of the first step, done individually by team members, is that it allows the quieter, more analytical people to develop their responses to the questions without being interrupted by the more outgoing, vocal types who might otherwise dominate in the face-to-face meeting. Also, it allows everyone the time to create more thoughtful responses.

So what would be on the list of questions? I've provided some of my favorites below.

General Questions

1. Are you proud of our finished deliverables (project work products)? If yes, what's so good about them? If no, what's wrong with them?
2. What was the single most frustrating part of our project?
3. How would you do things differently next time to avoid this frustration?
4. What was the most gratifying or professionally satisfying part of the project?
5. Which of our methods or processes worked particularly well?
6. Which of our methods or processes were difficult or frustrating to use?
7. If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about the project, what would you change?
8. Did our stakeholders, senior managers, customers, and sponsor(s) participate effectively? If not, how could we improve their participation?

Phase-Specific Questions (These will differ from project to project, depending on the life cycle/phases. The phases identified below are explained in detail in *The Project Manager's Partner: A Step-by-Step Guide to Project Management* and *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Project Management*.)

Phase I: Determine Need and Feasibility

1. Did our needs/market analysis or feasibility study identify all the project deliverables that we eventually had to build? If not, what did we miss and how can we be sure our future analyses don't miss such items?
2. Did our needs/market analysis or feasibility study identify unnecessary deliverables? If so, how can we be sure our future analyses don't make this mistake?
3. How could we have improved our need-feasibility or analysis phase?

Phase II: Create Project Plan

1. How accurate were our original estimates of the size and effort of our project? What did we over or under estimate? (Consider deliverables, work effort, materials required, etc.)
2. How could we have improved our estimate of size and effort so that it was more accurate?
3. Did we have the right people assigned to all project roles? (Consider subject matter expertise, technical contributions, management, review and approval, and other key roles) If no, how can we make sure that we get the right people next time?
4. Describe any early warning signs of problems that occurred later in the project? How should we have reacted to these signs? How can we be sure to notice these early warning signs next time?
5. Could we have completed this project without one or more of our vendors/contractors? If so, how?
6. Were our constraints, limitations, and requirements made clear to all vendors/contractors from the beginning? If not, how could we have improved our RFP or statement of need?

7. Were there any difficulties negotiating the vendor contract? How could these have been avoided?
8. Were there any difficulties setting up vendor paperwork (purchase orders, contracts, etc.) or getting the vendor started? How could these have been avoided?
9. List team members or stakeholders who were missing from the kickoff meeting or who were not involved early enough in our project. How can we avoid these oversights in the future?
10. Were all team/stakeholder roles and responsibilities clearly delineated and communicated? If not, how could we have improved these?
11. Were the deliverables specifications, milestones, and specific schedule elements/dates clearly communicated? If not, how could we improve this?

Phase III: Create Specifications for Deliverables

1. Were you proud of our blueprints or other detailed design specifications? If not, how could we have improved these?
 2. Did all the important project players have creative input into the creation of the design specifications? If not, who were we missing and how can we assure their involvement next time?
 3. Did those who reviewed the design specifications provide timely and meaningful input? If not, how could we have improved their involvement and the quality of their contributions?
 4. How could we have improved our work process for creating deliverables specifications?
- [Insert your own, deliverables-specific questions here.]

Phase IV: Create Deliverables

1. Were you proud of our deliverables? If not, how could we have improved these?
 2. Did all the important project players have creative input into the creation of the deliverables? If not, who were we missing and how can we assure their involvement next time?
 3. Did those who reviewed the deliverables provide timely and meaningful input? If not, how could we have improved their involvement and the quality of their contributions?
 4. How could we have improved our work process for creating deliverables?
- [Insert your own, deliverables-specific questions here.]

Phase V: Test and Implement Deliverables

1. Were the members of our test audience truly representative of our target audience? If not, how could we assure better representation in the future?
 2. Did the test facilities, equipment, materials, and support people help to make the test an accurate representation of how the deliverables will be used in the "real world?" If not, how could we have improved on these items?
 3. Did we get timely, high-quality feedback about how we might improve our deliverables? If not, how could we get better feedback in the future?
 4. Was our implementation strategy accurate and effective? How could we improve this strategy?
 5. Did our hand-off of deliverables to the user/customer/sponsor represent a smooth and easy transition? If not, how could we have improved this process?
- [Insert your own, deliverables-specific questions here.]

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