

# LASTING IMPROVEMENT

Looking for training with a legacy? *BY NEAL WHITTEN, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR*

**D**oes the following declaration from a frustrated middle- or senior-level manager sound familiar?

“I hire trainers to teach project management skills to my organization. Typically, the organization experiences a motivational boost for a week, maybe a month. Then things mostly go back to how they were before the training. Why don't the lessons stick? Is this project management stuff overhyped?”

From my experience, there are five steps needed to institutionalize effective and continuously improving project management across an organization—and most of these actions are not performed in the majority of organizations!

## Step 1. Identify a project management champion and set a plan.

Someone needs to be assigned to lead the charge for effective change and then held accountable for that change. This means a plan needs to be created that is measurable and will show an acceptable level of improvement from quarter to quarter with refinements to the plan as necessary. No wimps need apply.

## Step 2. Define a project management methodology.

Define and document the project management methodology that is expected to be followed. Perfection is not the objective; the methodology should evolve over time. But it must provide sufficient direction to help its users start on solid footing and remain there throughout their projects.

Don't assume users of the methodology will understand how to best implement it because it is documented. Training must be provided to all who are expected to use it—not just training of the methodology framework but also for

the “hard” skills required for the methodology, such as gathering requirements, creating a project management plan, implementing an effective change control process, performing risk assessments and conducting lessons learned.

## Step 3. Teach project managers how to think and behave.

Understanding project management hard skills clearly is important. However, the primary reasons for project failure almost always are tied to weak leadership and “soft” skills. Among other things, project managers must be trained to:

- Become effective leaders
- Think for themselves
- Implement effective time management
- Deal with difficult stakeholders at all levels
- Recognize and deal with professional immaturity
- Escalate issues to closure
- Hold stakeholders accountable
- Negotiate
- Communicate
- Ask for help when necessary

Project managers are business people first and foremost. Training project managers to think this way will help them better understand their job and increase their effectiveness.

## Step 4. Make sure project managers understand how to apply lessons learned from Step 3.

Leadership, accountability and professional maturity issues are all too common on projects. Address these issues head-on through a Q-and-A workshop in which attendees pose short problem scenarios they currently face or may face. The attendees then propose their best idea for handling the scenario. The workshop leader

evaluates the solutions and reveals the best course of action.

The workshop takes learning to a personal level where everyone is involved in identifying and solving real and current problems based on the fundamental training received in Step 3.

## Step 5. Routinely review projects underway.

This workshop is an unusually powerful tool that combines assessing the health of ongoing projects while mentoring those in attendance through a lessons-learned process for each project reviewed.

Now that the project managers and their core team members have been trained in the previous three steps, their performance in applying those lessons are reviewed openly. By the conclusion of the workshop, the attendees are armed with a list of recommendations to take back to their projects and implement. No theory or schoolbook jargon here; only specific real-world solutions to real-world problems.

Consistently building the best products and offering the best services does not happen by accident. You first have to ensure that the project manager and team members have been trained and nurtured to become the best, that they know what is expected of them, and that behavior is observed and reinforced day-in and day-out.

This stuff works, but it requires deliberate thought, planning and execution. Does your organization care about being the best? Do you?



Neal Whitten, PMP, president of The Neal Whitten Group, is a speaker, trainer, consultant and mentor. His newest book is *The Gift of Wisdom: Lessons for a Lifetime*.