

# STICK TO IT

Knowledge must not only be captured—but applied.

BY SHEILINA SOMANI, PMP, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Although most organizations recognize the importance of acquiring and using project information effectively, they still struggle with actually implementing knowledge management. Many fail to make the time to capture and reuse project data. Others capture lessons learned but fail to apply them.

Within project teams, capturing knowledge is often a thankless task. Few endeavor to produce information, many reject what is gathered without review, and only the remaining elite avidly read and reuse the data.

Eric von Hippel first coined the term “knowledge stickiness”—referring to how much knowledge gained by experience is or is not captured, communicated or reapplied. This term describes the difficulties knowledge transfer creates for many in project, program and portfolio management.

In his book, *Sticky Knowledge: Barriers to Knowing in the Firm* [Sage Publications Inc., 2003], Gabriel Szulanski outlines seven characteristics of knowledge stickiness as related to stakeholders:

- 1. Source lacks motivation.** The people who gain the knowledge aren't motivated to communicate, share or value it.
- 2. Source lacks credibility.** The people who provide the information aren't valued or have no formal means to validate the knowledge gained.
- 3. Recipient lacks motivation.** The people receiving the information have no interest in capturing or using the information.
- 4. Recipient lacks absorptive capacity.** The people receiving the information are simply not able to grasp the knowledge.
- 5. Recipient lacks retentive capacity.** Having received the information, the people don't apply or voice the knowledge in a new context.
- 6. Barren organizational context.** The corporate culture isn't supportive of any change in practice—people are content to do things the same way they've always been done.
- 7. Arduous relationship between source and recipient.** The value of the knowledge is superseded by the negative attitudes and perceptions of the parties involved.

Given the importance of knowledge capture, management and reuse within the business environment, these are significant risk factors for every project.



From the outset of any initiative, project managers have the opportunity to lead by example, using knowledge from their past experiences to guide planning on the current project. Project managers should also encourage comments and input from team members and give credit where due. Publicizing input from individuals can be a great way to motivate team members to actively contribute.

At project closeout, the knowledge communicated to the business can add to future effectiveness of the organization, speed the process of future projects and positively influence the risk profile of future projects by encouraging best practice.

Once organizations are able to communicate these challenges and use team charters to clarify individual responsibilities, they can then use evaluation and review practices to ensure they:

- Apply knowledge-capture techniques
- Record lessons learned
- Realize the value of knowledge reuse.

All stakeholders need to be aware of where they can alleviate knowledge stickiness and create a more fruitful environment where those capturing and sharing knowledge gain the recognition they deserve—so all future projects can benefit from past endeavors and outcomes. And it's up to project leaders to champion the cause. PM

*Sheilina Somani, PMP, is owner of U.K.-based Positively Project Management, providing consulting, mentoring and development services.*

