I had never thought of myself as a thief, but there I was, peering at stuff that clearly wasn’t mine and quietly slipping it into my “toolbox” for my own personal use. It was broad daylight, and I was in plain view of at least a dozen people. The audacity!

At least that’s how it felt to me initially. I have the honor of being on the Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL) Knowledge Sharing Feedback and Assessment Team (FAA), and as such, I am privileged to receive the feedback written by many of you as attendees of the Project Management (PM) Master’s Forums. It is the intent of the FAA Team and APPL leadership to use this feedback as a tool for continuous program improvement.

As a retired (sort of) PM in the payload contracting industry, I’m a big supporter of NASA’s Knowledge Sharing Initiative (KSI), especially the Master’s Forums. I really enjoy participating in them. Unfortunately I had to miss the 8th forum in Pasadena this past Spring, but I did get the feedback package for the Assessment Team work. So here I was, reviewing twelve pages of comments, reflections, learning notes and critiques from attendees of the 8th forum.

THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

The FAA’s mission is to find the positives and negatives in the feedback and compile them for discussion. Shortly into the process of reading the comments, however, my mission changed. I found myself progressing through the feedback, agenda item by agenda item, and actually attending the forum vicariously through the feedback writers! I became engrossed in the content. I felt as though I was blindfolded at a fast-moving sporting event and the play-by-play was being described to me by many others around me.

The feedback was incredibly detailed and well written, complete with application notes, doubts and potential pitfalls. Not surprisingly, I found myself learning rather than reviewing! I was actually taking away knowledge, forming opinions of my own, and developing questions, as though I had been sitting right there! That’s why I initially felt like a thief. Actually I was experiencing remote learning, not only from the original forum presenters, but also from the feedback writers.

CAUGHT RED-HANDED

I myself have “stolen” lessons from various storytellers and practitioners that have participated in APPL’s programs over the years. I took the importance of storytelling as a means of conveying lessons learned—and also ways to implement this tool with a program team—from Annette Simmons’s ASK 18 Special Feature, “Dressing up the Naked Truth.” From Dr. Gary Klein, a keynote speaker at the 7th Master’s Forum, I discovered the use
of "pre-mortems" as risk identification tools to help a
team communicate effectively with a shared risk manage-
ment philosophy. I learned ways to spot the predictors of
successful program management behavior during the
selection interviewing process from ASK feature writer
Scott Tibbitts's article, "Tell Me About Your Lemonade
Stand," which appeared in ASK 18. And these are just a
few of the things I've taken away with me.

As for the feedback accounts, it's clear that the
8th forum was a huge success. As I reviewed the
agenda topics, then read the presentation slides and
the feedback, I found many of the common themes
that always surface when Program/Project Managers
gather to discuss successes and failures. A
few of these common success factors were: effective
communication both inside and outside your project
team; the fact that "people" management—rather
than "technical" management—is the most important factor
for overcoming adversity; and the argument that leadership
is founded on the principles of interpersonal
relationships—including mutual respect, trust, open
communication, and the creation of an environment
that encourages new ideas and personal growth. And
even though these are repeating success factors, there
are always new stories, new thoughts, and new shared
experiences dealing with their successful application.

But my review of the forum material and feedback
also revealed some newer topics as well. This knowledge,
too, I snatched up like the proverbial starving squirrel
after the world's last acorn; into my own PM toolbox
they went! This included thoughts and concepts such
as "the conductor does not make any noise, but
gets the best possible music out of the orchestra." I
learned new ideas for motivating teams and individ-
uals and reflected on a debate about intrinsic vs.
extrinsic motivation. I also read about the increasing
importance of coaching and mentoring with notes
for effective implementation of these concepts, the
use of Test Readiness Levels (TRL) for managing
Software project risk, considerations for establishing
pro-active "coyote teams" versus re-active "tiger teams"
and more.

LIKE TAKING CANDY FROM A BABY
This exercise in remote learning has been valuable
to me. It has provided many new ideas for me and
reinforced existing project management success
concepts. It has illustrated to me, and hopefully to you,
that we don't have to be there to learn from it. The
available material alone is very useful. Coupled with the
excellent feedback from the gracious attendees, it was
almost as good as being there!

And the folks at APPL are great at keeping the
forum agendas and the presentation packages on their
website, which can be accessed according to the forum
number and date at http://appl.nasa.gov/businessunits/
knowledge/programs/master_forums.html.

You may have also noticed that many of the Forum
presentations also appear in narrative format in ASK
Magazine, available online at www.appl.nasa.gov/ask.
That means that this same knowledge, without the
editorial comments found in feedback, is available on
the APPL website to everyone, whether you attended
the forum or not. Anyone can "steal" this knowledge
sharing opportunity.

I wasn't able to attend the 8th forum this past year,
but I was able to take part in the knowledge sharing.
To those of you who wrote the excellent feedback,
I thank you. I'm looking forward to seeing you in
San Francisco!

LESSONS

• When you are open to it, Knowledge Sharing becomes
a tool for life, not a one-day workshop. Never underesti-
mate the lessons you could learn from "communities of
practice" composed of your experienced peers.

• Reinventing the wheel isn't admirable if it's unneces-
sary. Don't be afraid to steal, imitate, revise, and reuse
the lessons and best practices of others.

QUESTION

For learning to occur, errors, mistakes, and occasional failures
must be accepted. How does one create the conditions that
overcome human nature: the fact the "everyone wants to learn,
but nobody wants to be wrong?"

After over 28 years of program management
experience, LARRY GOSHORN retired in 2003
from ITT's Aerospace/Communications Division
as the Director of Space Programs. During
his career, he successfully managed a variety
of NASA payload projects, and he now works as a program
management consultant in the Aerospace Industry. Goshorn
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