



**The Post Mortem Review
for
Founders, CEOs
of
Startups and Small Companies**

**Created: 5 January 1991
Revised: 10 November 2013**

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Introduction

The conduct of a post mortem or after action report, upon the completion of a project for a startup or small company, may deliver important learnings and insights. This paper sets out how one might go about doing just that.



This paper is written for CEOs by a very experienced Chief Executive Officer. Jeffrey L Minch has been a Founder, President, CEO, Director of public and private companies for over 33 years. Twenty five of those years were spent with only two companies.

Minch is only writing to the CEO and is not representing the views of shareholders or Boards. He is not hostile to either of those constituencies but he is speaking to the CEO and her mates around the C suite, top management.

Minch spends his time as a CEO mentor, advisor and coach providing services to only CEOs and C suite clients. His clients currently are CEOs in England, Japan, Canada and throughout the United States. Clients are typically startup CEOs, many venture capital funded, and small businesses.

Minch is able to use his decades of leadership and management experience to make a CEO's "tuition" a bit less costly. One has to learn from experience but it does not have to be yours, it does not have to be painful and you do not have to pay full tuition.

Minch calls his mentoring, advisory and coaching enterprise **The Wisdom of the Campfire**.

Envision the exchange of information that takes place at the end of a day alongside a comforting campfire when the folklore and culture of an enterprise is passed from seasoned professional to the new breed.

The topics are often leadership, management, startups, basic company building, business planning, fundraising, Boards of Directors, the design of executive compensation programs, employment agreements, marketing, technology, hiring, company culture, performance appraisal, competition, intelligence, legislation, lobbying, litigation, pricing and cheerleading.



There is little that a CEO will face today that Minch has not faced in 33+ years of CEO-ing.

Minch writes a blog called **The Musings of the Big Red Car** --- www.themusingsofthebigredcar.com, which addresses some of this myriad of subjects. One can obtain much information of these subjects by reading it daily. The blog is organized around particular themes such as the Company Culture series, the C Level Employment Agreement series. It is targeted toward CEOs and those aspiring to become CEOs.



The Big Red Car is a 1966 Impala convertible which is able to access the Internet and eavesdrop on The Boss's (Minch) conversations. It is written with tongue firmly in cheek and with a sense of humor.

In addition to providing direct consultation and the Big Red Car blog, Minch has accumulated a huge library of exemplars which he generously shares with anyone who can use them.

Need a good Vision, Mission, Strategy, Tactics, Objectives, Values, Job Description, process flow chart, Performance Appraisal, capital table, fundraising term sheet, asset sale letter of intent or other pertinent document? Minch has 33 years of such documents at his fingertips and knows how they are drafted, interpreted and work. This is very cheap tuition.

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Reach out and I will be glad to help. You can find me on aboutme.com, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media. Feel free to connect.

Life does not have to be hard when you can get a hand up and a bit of assistance. When you can tap into the Wisdom of the Campfire.

**Jeffrey L Minch
Austin, Texas
June 2013**

“No plan ever survives first contact with the enemy.”

Anonymous

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One of the most powerful leaning experiences any Founder or Chief Executive Office of any startup or small company can embrace is a careful analysis of how a project turned out. This is essential to create a “learning organization” --- one which continues to improve at every opportunity and which avails itself of iterative growth toward the highest possible level of achievement. There is really no ending point --- you just keep getting better.

This is NOT intended to be applied to things so complicated and complex like the Manhattan Project --- though it certainly could be --- but to real world situations in startups and small businesses which want to put a thermometer in from time to time and take their own temperature.

Like any tool, one can get caught up in the quality of the tool and lose the perspective of what the tool can do in the hands of the craftsman.

- ❖ Imagine a lovely titanium hammer with a perfect casting and a flawless rubber grip. It is a 17 ounce hammer and it costs \$159.99. It is almost a work of art.
- ❖ Imagine, alternatively, a lovely steel hammer, with an obvious rough casting cleaned up a bit with some strategic grinding and a wood handle. It is also a 17 ounce hammer and it costs \$19.99. It is well worn.

The poor unsuspecting nail will never really know whether its head was struck by the \$159.99 hammer or the \$19.99 hammer. If a square blow is struck, the nail will end up in the same final resting position.

We are focusing on the quality of the use of the hammer and not the hammer itself. What you are reading is written by someone who has been doing debriefings, after action reports and post mortems for over 40 years. His is a well-worn \$19.99 hammer which has struck quite a few square blows in its lifetime.

Visualize a buffet of many different foods including salads, soups, breads, appetizers, main courses, dessert and drinks. You don't have to eat them in any particular order and you can go back for seconds any time you want to do so. You can take a taste and spit it out. You can eat quickly. You can eat at your leisure. You can just go home. You can stop whenever you are full. You can take some home to eat later.

Here is the buffet. Before you begin to commit things to writing, take a quick look and decide what questions you really want answers to.

There is a Sample Team Survey attached. Take a look at that and decide if it might be a good idea to do that first. It is not essential and sometimes a freewheeling meeting will get a more genuine response as the emotions begin to flow. Your call really.

DEFINE SUCCESS

Success is what you are looking for, right? So let's start there and just take a quick snapshot of how you intend to use the results of the post mortem.

1. Before you even begin to conduct the post mortem, ask yourself: If this post mortem is successful what will it look like? How will I use it? Will I publish a report?
2. Can you define success --- of the post mortem, not the project --- sufficiently that you will recognize it? Take a minute and chat with yourself.
3. Is it going to be a team building exercise or something that informs only you? Either approach is just fine.

FINAL RESULTS

Let's start at the end rather than the beginning. We are, after all, trying to assess the final results, right?¹

4. Did the project accomplish its objectives?
5. Did it exceed, meet or fall short of your personal expectations?

Be prepared to have a difference of opinion with your team on this if this was a team effort. As a Founder, CEO you are likely a stern taskmaster on your own efforts. Give yourself permission to be something other than perfect. Nobody really is.

6. Did the project adhere to its schedule and budget?
7. On a scale of 1-10 what is the grade at this instant in time?

Don't belabor this but do take a quick poke at the results to ascertain whether you are going to be building a monument to the effort or whether you are going to be burying the ashes of a failed effort. Most projects end up somewhere in the middle.

If the project is a customer facing project, then obtain customer input to ascertain whether the project was successful or not.

Give yourself permission to personally learn and fail/succeed. Many initiatives require a CEO to try twice to succeed once. Life is funny that way. Don't beat yourself up.

PLANNING

The first casualty of contact with the enemy is the plan. No big revelation there. Plans are made to be changed and changing them on the fly is an essential executive skill for a CEO. But let's take a look at the plan. [I am going to number things sequentially so you can avoid any confusion as to the point you are speaking to in your dialogue.]

8. Did you have a written plan? How good did you think it to be when it was done?
9. Who made the plan? You alone? The team?

¹ You may want to conduct the survey identified later in this document as a prelude to doing anything. Feel free to do just that.

10. Did the plan adequately identify the required outcomes? Did you define success?
11. Did the plan have clear deliverables? Did everyone understand this?
12. Did the plan have a schedule and a budget?
13. Was the plan communicated to the team? Did they appear to understand it? Had they had input on the plan?
14. Did you revise the plan and reissue it at any interim node? Did you need to?
15. If you were re-doing this today, would you do it differently and better?
16. On a scale of 1-10, how good in retrospect was the plan?

TEAM

In pursuing any effort, it is likely that you will have undertaken this as a team effort. So let's chat about the team a bit.

17. Who was on the team? Doers, stakeholders, innocent bystanders?
18. In retrospect did you have the right folks on the team? Who would you change, if anyone? Who would you have added?
19. Did they have any input into the planning of the project?
20. Did you get your best work out of the team?
21. Did they understand the plan?
22. Did they embrace the plan?
23. Is the team satisfied with, proud of the results?
24. Who was identified as being responsible and accountable for the deliverables? Did they meet that challenge?
25. Who was the team MVP?
26. Who was the team slaggard? Does that irritate or frustrate you? What will you do about it?

27. Was the creation of the team a “multiplier” --- collective effort was more than the sum of individual efforts?
28. Did the team provide any interim feedback? Did you follow it?
29. Do you want to conduct an after action team survey to collect raw data before you even begin the post mortem? This can be very useful.
30. Can the team identify the three best and worst things about their efforts?

COMMUNICATION

Sometimes a great plan falls prey to weak communication. Sometimes a great communication plan can draw out the plan and make it a big success.

31. How did you communicate the plan to your team?
32. Did you conduct a kickoff meeting and was everyone there?
33. How did they respond?
34. Did the team seem to understand and embrace the plan? Did they seem to get it?
35. Did they seem to understand their individual roles and objectives?
36. Did you have periodic efforts to obtain interim feedback or did you just wait for the final report card?
37. As you were nearing completion, did you have a sense of where you were because of the feedback from the team?
38. Did you have periodic progress meetings with the team and were these effective means of communication?
39. What would you change about the nature of your communication before and during the project?
40. Does it make sense to conduct a post mortem team survey? An example is attached to this document.

41. On a scale of 1-10, how good was the communication of the plan before and during the project?

INTERIM RESULTS

Many times in the course of undertaking a project it may be necessary to test the hypothesis and to make some interim measures of success. An example might be a bit of alpha testing of a new web based product or a focus group for a marketing project.

42. Did the plan have clear milestones and interim test nodes? Did it need them?
43. What were the results and how did you pivot to absorb this reality into the plan?
44. Was there an indication --- early warning signs, the canary in the mineshaft --- that the project was headed to success or failure at an interim point in time? Did you detect it? Did you act upon it?
45. How would you change the interim results testing if you did the project again? Why?

SCORECARD

In viewing the results, it is important to develop a bit of specific framework to assess where things really are. Here are some important questions to be answered in a consensus manner.

46. Was the project --- overall --- a success or failure? Why?
47. Anybody offering to take accountability for the success or failure?
48. If it was a failure or a limited success, was it a leadership, management, work or process failure?
49. What were the three best things about the project?
50. What were the three worst things about the project?
51. What are three things what the team would change about the project?
52. If you held the Magic Wand ---what would you change?
53. What was the single most gratifying element of the project?

54. What was the single most frustrating element of the project?
55. How good was the schedule and budget v reality? Where were the sticking points? How could they be changed?
56. If you employed outside vendors --- how did they do? Would you use the same ones today? Was fair value received?
57. Could we have done without the vendors?
58. Did this project distract the team from their core responsibilities? Was that a problem? Was it appropriate? How much of a distraction?
59. Did the entire team have a chance to review interim work product and to comment on it?
60. Did you have interim progress meetings or other communication?
61. If customer centric, was the target audience involved in evaluating progress during the interim?

FINAL WORK PRODUCT

One of the big questions is how do you intend to use the results of the post mortem. You might consider them as falling into one or more of the following categories:

- ❖ A quick post mortem for the CEO to take a skin temperature of the project and to inform herself of how the team views things. Personal growth.
- ❖ A detailed post mortem --- written report catching the learnings --- for the CEO and the team to have a deeper learning experience to improve and inform other future projects. Institutional growth, process design.
- ❖ An after action report to inform the CEO and the team before they re-launch the project to obtain better results. This is in many instances how the second effort is substantially more successful as it builds upon the first effort.

CEOs should not be afraid to just use the effort as a personal scorecard and not to engage in a lot of administrative hand wringing and a formal report of any kind whatsoever. Nothing wrong with this approach. Don't miss the opportunity to learn.

REVISIT THE RESULTS

If you decide to write a detailed in depth report maintain an institutional memory of things and when you launch your next project take a look at the most recent post mortems to inform your efforts.



The Post Mortem Review Sample Team Survey

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The audience for this sample survey is the team who has worked with you on the project for which you are conducting a post mortem. Use something like Survey Monkey to conduct the survey so it can be compiled quickly. It is set up as an anonymous survey but that is your decision to make.

Here are some questions that may be useful.

1. Did you understand the objectives of the project?
2. How were they communicated to you?
3. On a scale of 1-10, how good was the original plan?
4. Was your role meaningful?
5. What were the three best things about the project?
6. What were the three worst things about the project?
7. What was the single most gratifying element of the project?
8. What was the single most frustrating element of the project?
9. Who was the project MVP?
10. Who was the project sluggard?

11. What were the results?

12. Were you in agreement with the results?

13. Were you proud of the results?

14. If you had a Magic Wand, what is the one thing you would change?

15. What did you learn on this project?

Feel free to add and delete questions as you desire but these questions should get you a preliminary sense of what the team thinks and should inform the balance of your post mortem efforts.