

What is a Pause and Learn session?

A Pause and Learn (PaL) session is a method for reflecting and transferring individual lessons from a specific project event among fellow team members.

Team members meet behind closed doors, take off their official “hats” for a brief period, and look back on a recent event to gain a more thorough understanding of what has happened, and why.

Many organizations have successfully adopted this type of organizational learning (sometimes referred to as action-learning), including: Shell Oil, IBM, Fidelity Investments, US Army, and Harley Davidson.

NASA’s version is called the Pause and Learn session.

Key Benefits:

- ✓ Identify and spread local best practices
- ✓ Identify and eliminate wasted effort
- ✓ On-the-spot individual and team Learning
- ✓ Build a team approach to problem solving
- ✓ Build team morale
- ✓ Increase likelihood of project success

Post-mortem vs. PaL session *

Post-mortem	PaL session
Conducted at the end of project	Conducted throughout project
Used after a major mishap or accident	Used after any event-team success or challenge
Large scope – all past events	Small scope – one recent event
Lengthy process and large time commitment	Simple process and very small time commitment
Lengthy report (few read it)	No reports – just insights and ideas useful immediately
Benefits mainly others who read the report	Benefits team members who participate

“The PaL process is not an after-action report, is not a post mortem study, and is not an investigation. It is simply a time to reflect and learn from what we have experienced.”

* = Adapted from Signet Consulting’s “From Post-Mortem to Living Practice. An in-depth study of the evolution of the After Action Review.”

How is a Pause and Learn session conducted?

Before a PaL session begins, a designated facilitator makes the ground rules clear:

- **Be discreet.** A PaL session is a closed-door discussion among team members. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, what gets said in the room stays in the room.
- **Be honest.** When the activity being discussed directly involves you, call it as you see it.
- **Be tolerant.** Others’ opinions and perspectives are equally important, regardless of rank or experience.
- **Be a team.** When looking at an individual’s actions, view it from the perspective of team responsibility for ensuring excellence.

Five Questions

A PaL session can explore many issues, but the team should try to focus on these five questions:

- What did we intend to do?
- What worked well, and why?
- What didn’t work well --why?
- What did we learn from this?
- What should we change?

Tips for Conducting Effective Pause and Learn Sessions

Identify a significant event – it’s easier if the PaL session can focus on one particular event that has occurred or is about to occur.

Make sessions brief – in most cases, between 1 and 2 hours. You may want an outside facilitator to help get them started (and to end).

Hold sessions regularly – learning happens throughout the life of a project—make PaLs a habit not an afterthought when your project is over.

No good or bad consequences –team members will be honest if what they say in a PaL session has no individual consequences. A PaL is a non-attribution environment.

Do not create reports – there are no formal reports from a PaL session. It is helpful to take notes for reference, but notes should not directly quote participants and are primarily intended for the team.

Make sessions local – find a room, close the door, and hold the session soon after an event, review etc. Don’t wait until a mishap occurs.

What some say about holding a PaL...

“Doing that one PaL session probably saved my project.” – Doug McLennan, GSFC Project Manager

“Having that PaL session greatly improved our flight preparation process.” – Mike Rudolphi, MSFC Director of Engineering

“We would have a [PaL] session after an activity...and not just what we did wrong that needs improvement, but what we did right to make sure that we can repeat it.” – Marty Davis, GSFC, GOES/POES Satellite Program Manager



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OCKO Website

<http://www.nasa.gov/goddard/ocko>

Case Study Website

http://gsfcir.gsfc.nasa.gov/about_case_studies

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Pause and Learn

The PaL is a proven way to facilitate team learning during missions. It is sensible, valuable and simple to implement.

Learn how inside...