

White Paper

Rescuing Troubled Projects

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"Projects don't fail on their own accord. Some sequence of events (or lack thereof) preceded its failure. All failed projects were once projects in trouble. What are the telltale signs of a troubled project? How do you identify the problems? What corrective action can be taken to get the project back on track?"

Prologue

Over the past 15 years, project management has become recognized as a necessary skill and process for business success. It is now widely ingrained in many organizations around the world. "Project management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques to project activities to meet project requirements," *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* - Third Edition. Though the percentage of all projects failing has decreased over this time, over 50% still fail or face serious problems.

John Smith, author of *Troubled IT Projects: Prevention and Turnaround* defines failed projects as "Projects that did not make the journey from conception through to successful implementation."

Projects don't fail on their own accord. Some sequence of events (or lack thereof) preceded its failure. *All failed projects were once projects in trouble.* What are the telltale signs of a troubled project? How do you identify the problems? What corrective action can be taken to get the project back on track?

Trouble Signs

Projects are defined in terms of scope, cost and schedule. What are you going to do, how much is it going to cost and when are you going to have it done? Commonly known as the "Triple Constraints", these are the constraints on the project's execution. A successful project means that the project manager effectively managed all three constraints during the course of the project.

A change to one of the constraints will require one or both of the other constraints to be changed as

well. The triple constraint concept is used to communicate the impact of change to project stakeholders, helping to establish the project's critical success factors. These success factors establish the baseline in determining projects that are in trouble.

There are numerous project management experts and authors who have articulated telltale signs of projects in trouble. When all is said and done, the entire list is most likely traceable to scope, cost or schedule. Some frequent statements include:

- Scope creep!
- Cost overruns!
- Missed deliverables and schedules out of control!

Keep in mind that it is the project manager's responsibility to balance scope, cost and schedule. In a great majority of projects, you can count on at least one of the three constraints to change during a project.

Scope doesn't creep and costs don't get out of control; something precedes these realizations.

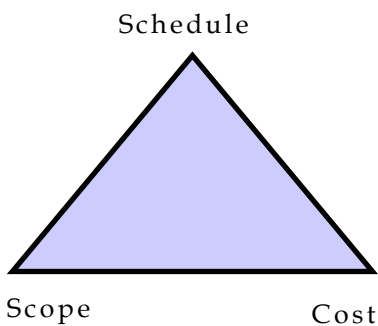
Breakdown in communication is the reason projects get in trouble. Think about it for a moment. Here are some of the trouble signs:

- Project alignment with business strategies cannot be articulated
- Project sponsorship not clear to all stakeholders
- Project sponsor not responsive
- Stakeholders receive inconsistent or conflicting project information

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Project Triple Constraints



"A Project is temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service"

- A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge - Third Edition

- Project information is not proactively communicated
- Project manager/team cannot articulate what product or service will be delivered and when
- Uncommitted project resources

Getting to the Root Cause (sledgehammers and 2x4's are optional)

To identify where the real project problems exist, focus at this stage of the project "rescue" is fact discovery, primarily through a series of interviews. Placing blame adds no value. Bring a new resource to the project to conduct these interviews and the analysis. 3rd party resources, such as Encore Consulting Services, have an advantage over an organization's internal personnel. The 3rd party does not bring "baggage" or prior project history and is not as heavily influenced by the organization's culture and political environment. It is very difficult for existing team members to temporarily separate themselves from the project and conduct these interviews.

This series of activities requires an experienced individual. The rescue project manager must be a very good communicator, diligent and "tough skinned." Keep in mind, the project is fighting for its life. Gopal Kapur, of the Center for Project Management in San Ramon, CA, says "Intelligent disobedient behavior is the ability to say a firm 'no' to the demands of executives and customers that put the project and organization in harm's way." This project manager will need to

exhibit some of this behavior as stakeholders are not happy with the project's current state and these will not be easy questions to ask, nor get answers to.

Using information from the various project plan documents and input from the project sponsor, scripted, open-ended questions are developed and the rescue project manager conducts a series of interviews in a short period of time. Quick identification and assessment are essential in containing the existing negativism and stopping the creation of any additional barriers about the project. The open-ended questions are direct in nature, designed to identify hard facts and uncover the root cause(s) of why the project is struggling. A sample question might be, "Is the project a WIN/WIN situation for all stakeholders and why?"

The rescue project manager must rely heavily on their soft skills. They will:

- Interview the project sponsor
- Interview project team members
- Interview key stakeholders
- Interview certain parties a second time to clarify what has been discovered
- Analyze the budget and the schedule
- Determine and/or confirm the project critical success factors

Getting Back on the Bike

Based on the information that has been gathered, the rescue project manager will either kill the project or put a plan in place to get it delivered.

Rescuing Troubled Projects

About the Author

Mr. David Baranowski is a Senior Consultant/Senior Project Manager with Encore Consulting Services, Inc. With over 25 years of project management, business operations management, and consulting experience, Mr. Baranowski has successfully delivered programs and projects for Fortune 500 as well as smaller-sized organizations. He is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and is an expert in shaping solutions to fit a customer's project needs.

The easy path is to kill the project. But if the facts support the benefits of the project, let's save it!

Return to the project basics of scope, cost and schedule. Revise your project plan and define what those constraints should now be. Manage those constraints. Set clear expectations of the revised scope, cost and schedule with all project stakeholders. Once the expectations of all stakeholders are reset, they need to be aggressively managed. Then, over-communicate. This cannot be emphasized enough.

Leave no doubt that your project sponsor is fully on board with the project revisions. Again, over-communicate.

Create a detailed communication plan and execute it.

- Tailor the plan to each defined audience, keeping specific mediums in mind for each audience
- Keep in mind that "one size does not fit all" (a 'one size fits all' communication plan will fail you)
- Solicit feedback. Include a feedback loop with key stakeholders

Make your first deliverable within the first 30-60 days of restarting the project. The project needs to deliver an initial "WIN" or two to build confidence, credibility, agreement, and momentum across all stakeholders, team members and customers alike. Communicate those WINS.

It is also important to stay on schedule and within budget as you restart.

It is critical to aggressively communicate a

"rescued" project during the first 30-60 days of its restart. Don't assume anything. Once back on track, communication frequency can be evaluated for appropriate frequencies and audiences.

Closing Thoughts

Projects can stumble badly, some to the point of never making it. However, every project will tell you that it is in trouble - you need to listen and look for the signs.

Put in the context of the cost of quality statement; the earlier in the project life cycle you find a defect, the less costly it is to fix. Similarly for a project; the earlier the troubled project is identified, the better its chance to be rescued, while minimizing additional costs.

Poor communication is at the root of projects getting into trouble. Fix the communication and the project has a good chance of recovering and being successful. Projects of all sizes can be rescued. Small projects can get back on track in a few weeks. Larger ones generally take longer.

About Encore's Project Management Services

Encore Consulting Services, Inc. offers a range of Project Management services, from Project Rescue to Project Management Office implementations to Training & Coaching for its clients. Adhering to a proven Project Management Methodology (Encore's PMTech) that is proactive and establishes a proper foundation at project inception will reduce the likelihood of a rescue situation occurring.