How to Avoid Project Failure by Rescuing a Troubled Project and Performing Project Recovery

By Bruce Beer, PMP

Consider the following scenario: you are the project manager of a brand new project. You have done your project planning and have started implementation. You are imagining what you can tell your PMI® colleagues at the next chapter meeting, creating a wondrous spreadsheet to revolutionize project control, and learning how to use a new state of the art software package you have just bought, when suddenly – you are in trouble. A project catastrophe arises that you never expected.

Your project is in trouble and likely to become a statistic for project failure unless some immediate action is taken. No amount of wishful thinking or hand wringing can fix the problem. You have to begin the project recovery process.

Common Recovery Theme

In this scenario, the analogy of a mobile army surgical hospital or MASH unit can provide some guidance. (Think of the TV series M*A*S*H.) Whenever there is an influx of injuries, the first thing performed is a "triage" (Encarta dictionary definition - the process of prioritizing sick or injured people for treatment according to the seriousness of the condition or injury). In effect, the doctors do not rush in and try to heal the first injury they see – they do an overall assessment of how serious each casualty is, then work on the most serious problem first, working down the priority list until everything has been treated. In project implementation terms there may be all sorts of things going wrong, such as being behind schedule, over budget, under resourced or having poor quality deliverables leading to non-acceptance. The primary question is how do you recover from this imminent project failure?

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Project Recovery: Evaluation

The first thing in project recovery is to evaluate the overall project. An audit or project review using a series of standard questions should identify the key problems and the severity of each one. This will allow you to prioritize project recovery planning and activity so that you tackle the most serious problems first, then work down the list. During the review, you might find some areas where you can stop the bleeding. For instance, if scope is unstable and forever changing, the introduction of a strict change control process should at least help to firm up and stabilize the scope.

The degree of project planning for project recovery will vary from project to project. Continuing our analogy, some projects may need a full anesthetic (stop all work) to allow an operation to be performed (redefining scope or even another round of project planning). Some projects may need a plaster cast to immobilize a broken part (to prevent any more changes to scope until the project stabilizes), some areas may need a bandage (some corrective measures that may restrict progress but not stop the project). Other projects only need a sticking plaster (minor corrective measures that have minimal impact on overall progress). Finally, some projects just need some TLC (to smooth out minor issues).

Recognize When Project Failure Is Unrecoverable

After evaluation of the troubled project you may determine that there is no good business case for project recovery so we may need to cut our losses and move on rather than waste time and money on project recovery planning. In this case of project failure, we need to plan euthanasia - let the project die as painlessly and with as much dignity as possible.

A failing project needs the help of a well-trained project planning professional, also called a Recovery Project Manager, to minimize recovery time, cost and residual damage if the project can be saved or to recognize when euthanasia is the recommended option.

Selling the Recovery Plan and Motivating the Stakeholders

Once the project planning professional has performed triage and avoided project failure, he has to be able to create and sell a prioritized recovery plan to all stakeholders. Communication is critical on any project, but it is particularly vital during project recovery where there may be a demoralized team, furious customer, nervous management, and unhappy financial analysts to satisfy.

When the plan is accepted and project recovery is under way, the project planning professional must be able to motivate the team to reach for success, assure customers and give them confidence in eventual success, and provide the financial analysts with a realistic plan that can

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be regularly measured and reported. Progress must be carefully monitored, controlled, and reported throughout the recovery and responses to unplanned events (risks) should be decisive, quick, and effective or you could be facing further project failure.

Finally, during the recovery period, it is important to keep your team positive – build in milestones to allow you to publicize and praise even small achievements. Build a momentum based on success, so that the team and other stakeholders perceive it as normal to meet milestones, and in contrast, missing a milestone is unusual and stands out amongst all the other successes.

Conclusion

Project failure is preventable with good project planning based on a well-constructed, deliverables-based work breakdown structure (WBS) and proper controls. However, once a project starts to fail, there are techniques to recognize it, minimize the extent of the project failure and make the project recovery as successful as possible. There may be some casualties along the way, such as some reduction in scope, additional time, and/or additional cost, but with good project planning and timely intervention where required, these can be minimized. A project manager needs to be trained in these techniques to not only recover a failing project, but more importantly, reduce the chances of creating one themselves in the future!

About the Author

Bruce Beer, PMP, is a certified project manager with over 30 years in the IT industry and over 25 years of project management experience in Europe and North America, including 20 years for Hewlett Packard Consulting. He is the founder and president of Apollo Project Management Consulting and specializes in project management training, project recovery, and project support. He is currently an instructor and course developer, including creating a two-day class on project recovery. Bruce is a member of PMI.

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