How to Avoid Project Failure Through Project Planning and Effective Project Recovery
~ By Bruce Beer

There you are, project manager of a brand new project, you have done your project planning and have started implementation. Now you are thinking about what you can tell your PMI (Project Management Institute) colleagues at the next chapter meeting, creating a wondrous spreadsheet to avoid project failure and revolutionise project control, and learning how to use a new whiz-bang software package you have just bought, when BAM - you are in trouble. A project wreck and you never saw it coming!

OK - so 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, praying to the great god PMI, or bashing your head against the nearest brick wall can turn the clock back - so now you have to begin the project recovery process.

Common Recovery Theme

Remember the TV series M*A*S*H? Whenever they had an influx of injuries, the first thing they did was "triage", which by definition from Encarta states that it is “the process of prioritising sick or injured people for treatment according to the seriousness of the condition or injury.” In effect, they didn’t rush in and try to heal the first injury they saw - they did an overall assessment of how serious each casualty was then worked on the most serious problem first, working down the priority list until everything had 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. So how do you recover from this imminent project failure?

Preventing Project Failure

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

**Recognise 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 minimise recovery time, cost, and residual damage if the project can be saved, or to recognise 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 prioritised recovery plan to all stakeholders. Communication is critical on any project, but it is particularly vital during project recovery where there may be a demoralised team, furious customer, nervous management, and unhappy bean counters 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, pacify customers and give them confidence in eventual success, and provide the bean counters with a realistic plan that can be regularly measured and reported on. Progress must be carefully monitored, controlled, and reported throughout the recovery and responses to unplanned events (risks) should be decisive, quick, and effective or we 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 publicise 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 and proper controls. However, once a project starts to fail, there are techniques to recognise it, minimise 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 minimised. A project manager needs to be trained in these techniques not only to recover a failing project, but more importantly, reduce the chances of creating one themselves in the future!
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