How to Really Fix a Failing Project
~ By Thomas Cutting

Your project is in trouble. You know it. Your team knows it. But somehow you have been able to keep it from your management. You need a quick fix. But there aren't any. What can be done to get back on track? Since yesterday’s ideas didn’t help, here are some suggestions that might point you in the right direction.

Refocus the Scope

Begin by going back to the defining documents including your Charter, Statement of Work and approved Change Requests. Figure out what you have committed to accomplish. Conversely, document all of the things that were unofficially added to the project. What you are trying to obtain is a clear understanding of the commitments and the expectations of others. With these lists in hand, meet with the project sponsor (or similar key stakeholders) and agree on what should be part of the current effort.

Draw Up the Schedule

Based on the remaining effort and current resources, recalculate the schedule. Forget the deadlines placed on the project at this point. Given the amount of work and people available, determine a realistic timeframe to complete the revised scope.

Determine the Cost

Find out what the budget is and how much has already been spent. After calculating the difference between the two amounts (hopefully it isn't negative) compare it to what remains to be done. Based on your revised schedule run the numbers to determine a reasonable estimate to complete.

Review Lessons Learned

Meet with the team and other stakeholders to determine where the project went wrong. Develop a list of steps to take in order to avoid the same thing happening next time.

Develop Alternatives

Using the scope, schedule and cost information review the options available. Based on the Project Triangle¹ that pits scope, time and cost against each other, consider the impact of each of your options on those factors. Will your plan include adding more resources? Extending the date? Reducing the scope? Although "phase 2" is always the answer to most project jokes, it can be a solid alternative. In some extreme cases the right decision will be to cancel the project. Although an unpopular choice, some projects need to be dropped. Reduce the testing phase is usually the popular option, but I don't recommend it.

¹
Admit Reality

Once you have drawn up a couple of viable alternatives, present them to the management team. Begin with a healthy dose of reality. Management does not like going through the failed project dance. If they have to do it twice things get ugly. Lay out the situation, preferably without playing the blame game. Then present your plans for getting back on track. Let them help you talk through the options and make suggestions.

Start Fresh

Issue a revised scope statement, obtain the funding, reset the schedule and obtain appropriate approvals. You have been given a new lease on your project. Work the plan and make sure to incorporate the lessons learned from your first attempt.

¹ Project Triangle: Picture a triangle where each of the three sides represents scope (or functionality), time and cost. If you change one side it impacts the other two. Reducing the size of the scope side will allow you to reduce the time and/or cost side. It is the same for the other sides as well. This is a standard and effective way to communicate the struggle between the three.

Thomas Cutting has earned experience in the entertainment, retail, banking, automotive, healthcare and health insurance verticals. Managing, training, mentoring and working in this diverse background provides the basis for his writing and speaking opportunities. For information or other inquiries, please visit his blog Cutting’s Edge Project Management

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