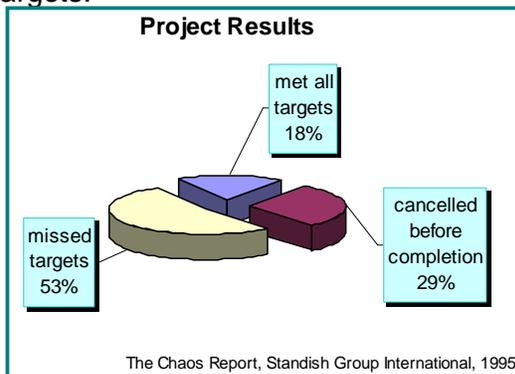


Mastering Projects Series

Recovering Troubled Projects

Too many projects fail. In the famous *Chaos Report*, the Standish Group found that 82% of the projects they studied either were cancelled outright or missed schedule, cost or feature targets.



Since troubled projects are widespread and expensive, you may be asked to rescue several of them during your career. How can you succeed at this intimidating challenge? Let me share some tips I've learned.

Five Steps to Recovery

Step 1 – Call 911

Delay can be fatal. Hospitals urge immediate action when you see the symptoms of a heart attack. Similarly, a troubled project rarely recovers until a leader acknowledges the project's serious problems and decides to deal with them. Experienced project managers can recognize many of the early symptoms of a project headed for trouble, such as these:

- Unhappy or disengaged customer or sponsor
- Unclear, shifting or creeping scope

- Frequent surprises and missed commitments, including schedule and budget
- Unclear roles and responsibilities
- Low morale, trust or performance among the project team
- Unresolved decisions and festering issues

Step 2 – Diagnose

When first responders arrive on the scene of a heart attack, they administer just enough immediate treatment to stabilize the patient and keep him alive for the trip to the hospital. You should do the same for your project. Apply first aid to immediate crises, such as listening to an angry customer. Stabilize the project just enough to give you time for a more thorough diagnosis and re-plan.

Resist the inevitable intense pressure to “fix the project” immediately. Would you trust a doctor who wanted to rush you into major surgery without taking enough time to diagnose your illness? Similarly, once the immediate crisis is under control, make time to dig deep into the root causes of your project's problems before prescribing solutions.

- *Set expectations.* Be firm that the project team must take enough time to thoroughly understand the situation and create a solid recovery plan. Set a clear deadline for how long the re-planning will take. Over-communicate to keep everyone informed, but don't make premature commitments without sufficient re-planning.

- *Enlist the patient's help.* People close to the project often can give you quality clues about what is wrong. Talk not just to the managers or leaders, but especially to the people "in the trenches" who are doing the heavily lifting on the project.
- *Polish up your bedside manner.* Listen! Ask many "no blame" questions. Get as many perspectives as you can possibly fit into the time you have.

Step 3 – Design a Recovery Approach

Most troubled projects got in trouble because leaders skimped on good project management techniques the first time. Do not allow the same mistake again. The sidebar lists the six most vital factors for project success. Shore them up on any project that you are fixing.

1. *Agreement on goals*
2. *A good plan*
3. *Progress measurement*
4. *Constant communications*
5. *Management support*

You and your busy project team can focus on fixing only a few things at once, so pick fixes that will give you the biggest impact for your investment of effort. Include some "low hanging fruit" so that you can show rapid progress, but do not settle for only quick fixes.

Here are some tips for creating a recovery approach.

- Clarify the project's business purpose. Everyone must understand the *why*.
- Make the scope of the project crystal clear. Get solid agreement on "what's in and what's out."

- Update the plan, completely replacing it if necessary. Use good planning techniques, such as a work breakdown structure, team-based estimating and dependency analysis.
- Make the hard tradeoffs now. The major constraints that you can affect are schedule, resources and scope. Some of your solutions may require significant buy-in and resources, so get the necessary approvals and commitments.
- Troubled projects usually struggle with frayed communications. In your recovery plan, include extra resources for improving communications and stakeholder management, including the project team, sponsors, and the surrounding organization.

Step 4 – Implement and Monitor

Get approval, then implement your recovery plan. Monitor progress frequently so you can learn quickly whether your plan is working. Eric Verzuh says that during disaster recovery, "Frequent status meetings focused on completing near term tasks will keep you on top of progress and allow you to solve problems early."¹

Communicate intensively. Secure highly visible quick wins, publicize your progress and celebrate small victories. This will improve team morale and assure concerned observers that the project is on a path to recovery.

Step 5 – Prevent

Medical experts know that early prevention is more effective and less expensive than critical care. The same is true for project management.

Troubled projects are a traumatic event that most companies want to avoid repeating. Take advantage of this motivation while the pain is still fresh. Find ways to prevent future occurrences, beginning with a project retrospective and the resolve to heed its recommendations.

Endpoint

Don't panic when you are asked to lead a project recovery! The experience will be intense and very visible, but you can depend on many of the same project management best practices that you already know. You will succeed using discipline, clear communication and leadership.

¹ Eric Verzuh, *Fast Forward MBA in Project Management 2nd ed*, John Wiley & Sons, 2005, p. 373.

About the Author

Jeff Oltmann is on the faculty of the department of Management of Science and Technology at the OGI School of Oregon Health and Science University. He is principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, LLC in Portland, Oregon (www.spspro.com). Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com.

© 2006 Synergy Professional Services, LLC Version 061019L jdo