



WHEN THINGS GO WRONG ...

RECOVERING A TROUBLED PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

One of the keys to project success and maintaining great customer relationships is responding well when things don't go as planned. Those of us who manage projects understand that every project has its challenges and issues that must be addressed during implementation. How we deal with these often determines whether the project is successful or not, and can either strengthen or damage our customer relationship. Recovery is the process of dealing with these challenges and issues, and effective recovery will result in greater respect, trust and appreciation from our customer and also help us develop as we learn from our experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The statistics regarding troubled projects are sobering. According to a survey conducted by Project Management Solutions (PM Solutions), firms on average manage \$200 million in projects each year; and, in the course of that year, these organizations will realize that more than a third of their projects - \$74 million worth – are at risk of failing¹. Jobs, and maybe the business itself, may be in jeopardy if nothing is done to mitigate the risks and actively attempt to recover these troubled projects.

PM Solutions' research shows that when organizations take actions to recover troubled projects, they are highly successful. Almost three quarters (74%) of the troubled projects that underwent recovery intervention in the past three years were recovered. In addition, 18% of these projects have recovery efforts that are still ongoing; the successful completion of these projects should boost the percentage of recovered projects substantially¹.

Those of us who manage projects understand that every project has its challenges and issues that must be addressed during implementation. How we deal with these often determines whether the project is successful or not, and can either strengthen or damage our customer relationship.

One of the keys to project success and maintaining great customer relationships is responding well when things don't go as planned. Recovery is the process of dealing with the challenges and issues we face within our projects, and effective recovery will result in greater respect, trust, and appreciation from our customer and also help us develop as we learn from our experiences.

It is for these reasons that this paper was written. Over the discourse of this paper, answers to the following questions will be addressed with the purpose to navigate an active, implementation (non-production) project from a state of chaos to-and-through the crisis situation into a calmed state of normalcy:

- Do we really know if we have a troubled project on our hands?
- Who should lead the project recovery effort?
- What are the characteristics and expectations of the project stakeholders during a crisis?
- What are the top steps to project recovery?
- How do you know when you have achieved project recovery?

What's the Project Situation?

Before we identify a project that is in a state of chaos or in a crisis situation, let's examine some essential criteria for detecting a failing or troubled project across the various competing project constraints (CPC)² and project success factors (PSF), where one or more of the following criteria apply:

Table 1. Some Symptoms of Failing and Troubled Projects across CPCs & PSFs

<i>CPC / PSF</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Description</i>
Financial	Failing	Actual costs have exceeded estimated budget, including any acceptable variances
	Failing / Troubled	There is a high probability risk that the project will fall short of expected profitability; return on investment
	Troubled	The project is expected to exceed the budget at completion by more than an acceptable percentage (e.g., 10%)
Scope	Failing	There is a significant miss-alignment in products and/or services with customer expectations
	Failing / Troubled	The number of work hours is exceeding budgeted hours by a significant percentage
	Troubled	The number of approved scope changes exceeds a given threshold.
Schedule	Failing	Tasks in the critical path for a milestone, subproject or entire project are behind schedule, and the forecast is to be unacceptably behind schedule at anticipated completion
	Troubled	There are significant gaps (e.g., greater than 5% over plan) between planned and actual milestone dates or completed deliverables, or there are no established milestone dates. I.e., critical issues in meeting or completing milestones, on time
Quality	Failing	Overall quality is not acceptable
	Troubled	The number of technical issues are critical and/or significantly growing
Customer Relationship	Troubled	The project team has a poor working relationship with the customer and/or the working relationship is rapidly declining
ROV	Failing / Troubled	There is a high probably risk that project will not delivery anticipated benefits; return on value

In almost every case, a troubled project exhibits classic warning signs (i.e., symptoms) such as those shown in Table 1. There are, however, some more subtle symptoms that a

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project is in trouble that might not glowingly stand out to the casual observer. These, more subtle warning signs, are shown in the table below³:

Table 2. Subtle Signs of Troubled Projects

Perpetual Green Lights but Little Activity:
Many of you are familiar with the approach of labeling projects when they are on schedule, budget, etc.; yellow when the project is falling behind; and red when the project is far behind and/or over-budget and/or having quality problems. Perhaps your key project has been reporting green for last three months but oddly there's been very little activity related to the project. This is a good indication that the project is actually in trouble.
Troubling Trends:
Experienced project managers (PMs) are familiar with using techniques like earned value management (EVM) to identify project progress by comparing actual to planned results for work completed, costs incurred and time spent. Though you may not be using EVM on your projects, you can watch for dramatic increases or drops in spending, dramatic changes to work being delivered or sudden changes in schedule with no new (approved) schedule dates. Such troubling trends are a sign your project is in trouble.
Lots of TBDs:
Effective risk and issue management, and follow-up on action items are critical to the success of our projects, yet may be ignored. If your project is well past the early stages but is reporting a lot of To Be Determined (TBDs) in the "Resolution" column for risks, issues and actions, then it's probably a troubled project, even if the schedule does not show it.
Non-Progress Reports:
You're wise so you ask your PM to provide status reports on a weekly basis. However, they're more like "Non-Progress" reports than progress reports because no progress has been made. In particular, if you've received two or more weekly status reports indicating no progress has been made (with no explanation), you're well on your way to having a troubled project on your hands, if you don't already.
Inability to Show Tangible Results:
Anyone from Missouri? If no, as management or PMs we should at least adopt their unofficial slogan as the "Show-Me" state in your everyday "walk." Synonymous with this phrase, "I'm from Missouri," which means "I'm skeptical of the matter and not easily convinced." As leaders, we should be skeptical – not be a push-over – and ask those leading or drill-down questions to have the team show you and me those tangible results on a periodic basis. The absence there, one can assume like the Non-Progress Reports that no progress is being made and we have trouble on our hands. This especially so if we've moved beyond the date when such progress should be evident.

To the enlightened or seasoned practitioner, a project is in a state of normalcy if the CPCs like scope, schedule, budget, and quality are all in check.

"Chaos," according to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, is the state of things when chance is supreme" or the inherent unpredictability in the outcome of a situation, event or

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[project, in our case]⁴. The term chaos is synonymous with confusion, disorder, disorganization, havoc, and mess to name several.

A project is in a state of chaos when:

- The team and/or senior management is oblivious to the situation at hand, or
- The team is aware of the situation but does not plan-then-act to recover the troubled project, or
- The recovery efforts are ineffective and the project is still in a mess.

Regardless, this is a “Houston, we still have a problem” type of situation.

“*Crisis*,” according to the dictionary, is a turning point (for better or for worse), a decisive moment, or an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending⁵. The term crisis is synonymous with an emergency, crunch time, and zero hour to name several.

A project in a state of crisis is not necessarily a bad thing: if in the case where it has transitioned from a state of chaos then we’re headed in the right direction. On the flip side, it is not a good thing if we’re now in an emergency situation after having been in a state of normalcy. Regardless, a crisis is heightened; defining moment for the project where the situation should be improved if the recovery efforts of both people and processes are effective. The absence thereof, we’re likely on a free-fall trajectory toward a chaotic situation.

Let’s assume the following:

- A project review has been conducted and we have identified that we have a troubled project (i.e., we’re at that defining crisis moment), and
- The powers that be have determined that the project is still a viable venture and it is not to continue on as is without some intervention.

So, what’s the next step, given that we know our project is in a crisis situation and one of the first decisions coming out of the project review is to venture down a path (a recovery path) that is different from status quo?

Who Should Lead the Project Recovery Effort?

While there are many factors that weigh into the success of project recover efforts, the research performed by PM Solutions shows the PM is unequivocally one of the most important⁷; no surprise here. The PM will, and should; play a significant role in addressing the causes of troubled projects as well as is responsible for effectively managing the process to recover them.

If you are a senior manager, you are charged with the responsibility to put and experienced project leader in the driver's seat who will lead your project on the required trajectory and at the required velocity. This leader should be armed with course-corrective steps that are transformational and likely in direct opposition to the current processes that are largely ineffective. Selection of the PM to lead the team through the recovery effort – the crisis – is no trivial matter. “First, get the right leader [in the driver's seat] on the bus.”⁷

Who should lead the project recovery effort: the current PM? ***No, unless this is a sudden crisis!*** From my experience, and the experience of others, the current PM will – with high certainty – be unable to turn the project around to the satisfaction of the stakeholders; sudden crisis being the exception. I'm sure there will be some who disagree but I believe you will find that not many business [unit] owners or CEOs who are going to trust a PM who doesn't have a fair amount of project turnaround experience. Having such [turnaround] experience enables the PM to manage a crisis, and keep it from degenerating into chaos. Since a turnaround is transformational and is likely so anti-status quo from the thinking: “well, this is the way we've always done it before, and so this is the only way that it will work” trap, experience from a different PM is best to substantially ensure success.

Can the current PM (hereinafter, “former PM”) – the one in place when we identified we have a troubled project – remain “on the bus” to be mentored and learn from the new leader? ***Depends*** ... Whether he/she can remain “on the bus” as an observer is largely dependent on his/her character and attitude, and who the team members and other on the external team (including the customer) have allegiance to. The former PM, if mentor-able, may remain “on the bus” – to learn – but his/her role and set of responsibilities for the project going forward will, in a big way, be different than before, and he/she must be willing to step aside and allow the new leader to do his/her job for the good of the project, company, and stakeholders. If there is any doubt whether he/she should remain “on the bus,” or if it is determined later than he/she should no longer be “on the bus,” then the former PM should be displaced swiftly, emotions and feelings aside.

What are the Characteristics and Expectations of the Project Stakeholders during a Crisis?

Leadership, during the crisis, is not for the rookie. It will require steadfast perseverance, lead by a savvy PM, who can and will work with the team members and stakeholders to navigate the project to a state of normalcy. Neal Whitten sums up leadership well: *Leadership is not about the ability of those around you to lead; it's about your ability to lead despite what's happening around you*⁸. Flight director Eugene Krantz, leader of the seventh manned mission in the American Apollo space program and the third intended to land on the moon (Apollo 13) is an exceptional example of a leader who created a culture of performance in a crisis situation. More will be shared on Krantz's leadership skills later in this section.

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As one can surmise, the characteristics and composition of the project team in an implementation crisis is drastically quite different than the team whose project is rocking along successfully. For the team to perform effectively, it must create a work environment where each member is empowered to contribute their expertise, skills, and experiences to the team's tasks⁹. The heightened urgency and gravity of the crisis situation at hand requires strong leadership and team members who likely will be called on to: work together for the first time, work outside of "normal" schedules, think "outside of the box" to solve problems quickly and effectively, be flexible, be open and adaptable to change as the situation will evolve and may grow worse before it gets better. Crisis situations demand that the team has a skill set necessary to improvise. Such team improvisation in a crisis situation involves teams responding to real-time experiences that inform their actions and prepares the team for the next set of actions that have to be undertaken⁹. Depending on the nature of the situation and solution under implementation, there may be little time for creating a pathway of conventional sequencing of planning, formulating, or implementing a crisis management strategy. Instead, in this type of situation and solution environment, the team constantly adapts to the situation by rapidly processing information and drawing on the intuition and mental frames of each team member as events unfold. Emerging from this process is an ad hoc team structure that is often built upon existing and supplemental team resources. Because we are operating in an atypical, non-normal situation do we throw away PM best practices? No, but we certainly must be open to more effective means to produce the desired results and such means is likely more suited to a leader and team who can work in an agile environment now versus a traditional work flow. In addition, such teams are responsible for working across their boundaries (e.g., maybe cross-organizational) to acquire information and build the relationships needed to achieve team goals that align with efforts to bring the project through and out of the crisis situation⁹.

The crisis will be a stressful time for the PM and his/her team but if managed correctly, it could be "their finest hour." When Apollo 13's oxygen tank exploded after two days into the mission, Krantz and his "Tiger Team," despite negative odds, safely led the team back to Earth. How did they do it? Krantz quickly built a team culture around the norms of optimism, a positive attitude, and that failure was not an option. He encouraged the team members to focus on keeping their cool and solving the problem by focusing on what was working¹⁰. Trust based on expertise and preparation supported the cultural norms that Krantz infused throughout the Tiger Team. This team consisted of twenty different types of specialists and experienced engineers, and the team members had a strong sense of camaraderie¹⁰. To reinforce the importance of the team knowing what to do during each phase of the crisis situation and how to work together as a team, Krantz put the team through flight simulations so they could make correct decisions under time pressures⁹. To facilitate communication, team members were co-located by functional expertise and not by hierarchical levels or employment status. Despite great hardship caused by limited power, loss of cabin heat, shortage of potable water, and the critical need to jury-rig the carbon dioxide removal system, the Apollo 13 crew returned safely to Earth six days after launch.

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Krantz led both the Houston-based team and the Apollo 13 crew through the crisis and to a state of normalcy because “he really led despite what was happening around him,” and with steadfast determination that “failure was not an option on his watch.” His Tiger Team, over the course of four days, became believers too that “failure was not an option on their watch,” and no matter what, with single purpose and mission, they were going to do whatever they could, with whatever resources they needed, on a mission-critical schedule, to bring the Apollo 13 crew back home safely.

Lastly, let’s not forget that the crisis project most often transcends outside of the core (or Tiger) project team; they can impact external stakeholders, such as customers, suppliers, competitors, and innocent bystanders. Teamwork in crisis situations necessitates balancing internal operations with those who are external to the team but are affected by the results. Therefore, to prevent crises in a crisis situation (i.e., let’s not make matters worse), the core team should constantly scan the external environment and monitor activities of key external constituencies⁹. Various external stakeholders’ identities and interests should be taken into account as the team charts a course for resolving the crisis. This suggests that team members need to think about the implications of their actions as they also relate to the external stakeholders.

What are the Top Steps to Project Recovery?

To this point, I believe we’ve set the stage to identify and describe the top steps to project recover by:

- Analyzing the project situation to determine if we have a project in either a chaotic or crisis state,
- Learning that we need a PM with project-recovery battle experience, and this leader may or may not be the PM in place at point of crisis determination, and
- Identifying and defining some characteristics and expectations of leadership, the team, and external stakeholders during a project crisis.

An organization’s Project Management Office (PMO) functions in a number of important ways to standardize and improve project management practices across an organization.

A project review and recovery process should be one of the PMO’s functions.

Regardless of the fact that your organization has or does not have a PMO, the top three steps to project recovery are shown below, in order of priority (note, if the situation is a “sudden (e.g., life threatening) crisis” then time is of the essence and some sub-steps in the list below may not apply or may need to be tailored to fit the situation at hand):

1. **Assessment:** Project recovery begins with an assessment of the situation at hand. The PM (i.e., new leader) must first conduct an assessment using interviews, project plans, status reports and other project artifacts. The purpose of the assessment is to review and document (in an objective, “State of the Project” report) the deltas between actual and expectations (plans) in such area as:

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- a. Goals and objectives
- b. Scope
- c. Schedule and Milestones
- d. Financials
- e. Resources
- f. Quality
- g. Risks (including determination if any risks have been identified and if those identified have come to fruition)

There is dual purpose for this “State of the Project” report: 1. It is shared with key decision-makers, and other key parties, in advance of a “State of the Project” meeting where options will be discussed and “response” decided, and 2. The information in the report, in whole or in part, could be key in re-baselining the project, depending on the “response” from the decision-makers (e.g., re-start, recover, re-scope) during the “State of the Project” meeting.

2. **Planning:** Based on the “response” from the Assessment and the “State of the Project” report, the PM will:
 - a. Develop a new plan (the “Recovery Plan”) that clearly defines the goals and objectives, schedule and milestones, scope, and the remainder of the CPCs², including identification of the critical path. This Recovery Plan must include some criterion that defines success so that all project stakeholders know when the project is out of the crisis situation and has arrived in a state of normalcy.

Such preparation does not guarantee success but it will significantly reduce the chance of failure and provide more response options.
 - b. Determine what resources are needed to recover the project. The personnel resources must be people the PM can trust, they must possess good judgment and be competent. It is the PM’s responsibility to ensure that each team member clearly understands their role, their responsibilities, and what is expected of them. In the same view, it is equally important that the team members understand the responsibilities of their teammates since there will likely be interaction amongst them.
 - c. Communicate the Recovery Plan; this resetting expectations.
 - d. As applicable, the PM should obtain senior management and customer sign-off on the Recovery Plan.
3. **Execution:** With Recovery Plan in place, it’s time for the PM to lead the team into action using PM best practices and the following tips and guidelines:
 - a. **Co-location.** Don’t even try to resolve a crisis from long distance; it very rarely works! The PM and his/her Tiger Team must be co-located

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(same space, same time zone, etc.) for optimal effectivity. Setup a war-room dedicated to the project.

- b. **Daily Scrum.** Conduct a daily, Tiger Team only, scrum meeting every morning at a set location (e.g., the war room) and at a set time. The PM will facilitate this and everyone on the Tiger Team must share and interact during this meeting. Both the PM and peers are expected to hold each other accountable for progression of their work against the Recovery Plan. Note this daily scrum is for the PM and his /her Tiger Team to conduct focused tactical and strategic work; it is not for senior management, the customer, or others to attend. The PM and his/her team do not need any such distraction. The PM can brief others outside of the daily scrum.
- c. **Action Log.** The PM is to create, update, and utilize an action item log (columns: ID, description, owner, due date, status) as an aid to managing the project recovery effort. This Action Log should be referenced in the Daily Scrum.
- d. **Weekly Progress/Status Report.** One of the responsibilities of the PM is to keep at least senior management and the customer informed on project recovery progress (against Recovery Plan), current status, high-level issues of concern to them, risks, and next steps. The weekly report should be shared one day in advance of a weekly meeting where senior management and/or customer can interact, via question and answer session, with the PM on the current “State of the Project.” If it is not feasible for all principals to be co-located, then a Web meeting will suffice. This meeting should be held at the same time and day each week but this meeting should not occur on the first or last day of the work week to best ensure proper participation.

No matter the current project situation, it is of utmost importance that the PM does not alienate him (her) self from management, the customer, or others, especially during this time. Senior management and the customer expect the PM to be candid, to exude integrity, credibility, and be trustworthy even if the news he (she) has to share is not good news. There should never be any surprises. Remember the saying, “bad news doesn’t get better with time.” Strong Caution: Trust and Credibility are hard to obtain. Once lost, they may be gone forever.

- e. **Communication.** Communication is a “feather in the PM’s cap” (so to speak, better be) regardless of whether the project is in a troubled state or not. One can guess that in a non-sudden project crisis that Communication was probably a lacking ingredient in the in the project at time of crisis determination. Noting Execution tips and guidelines, 3a – 3d, it should be of no surprise that Communication is instrumental to project recover success. The key to determining how much, how often,

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and to whom information is communicated is really determined by the nature of the crisis, who the recipients of such information are, and the nature of the crisis environment. Communication external to the Tiger Team should come from one source: the PM. It is of utmost importance that the PM maintains a relationship with the project stakeholders and keeps them informed because they may be able to help if needed.

- f. **Non-panicked Urgency.** Another on-going responsibility of the PM, while working through the crisis, is creating and maintaining a sense of urgency. Without this, people will refuse to believe (or forget) the seriousness of the situation, if not so apparent. However, this sense of urgency must be balanced with non-panicked action on the part of the PM. I.e., avoiding a Barney Fife scene (“the Andy Griffith Show”) could help the crisis from degenerating into chaos, which could cause team panic, loss of productivity, and temptation to jump ship.
- g. **Decisiveness.** The PM, and his/her Tiger Team, is expected to make the decisions that need to be made, when they need to be made, all the while keeping in mind the Recovery Plan and how such decisions can, and likely will, affect others.
- h. **Flexibility.** A change in the situation – during action of the Recovery Plan – may require the PM to apply some course-corrective adjustments to the plan. Inflexibility on the part of the team can be a problem in itself but this should always be balanced with sound judgment from the leadership and not quickly acting on a whim.
- i. **Who’s in Charge?** The answer to this better be the PM, with all the authority, not just the responsibility, and with the backing of senior management.
- j. **Watch the Basket.** Though the traditional advise is “don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” the celebrated author (Mark Twain) was famous for saying, “...put all your eggs in one basket and --- Watch That Basket.”¹¹ Neither the PM nor the Tiger Team needs to be distracted from their mission; that is recovery of the troubled project. All focus and attention must be on watching the “project basket” throughout the crisis and for a time period under the new state of normalcy.

An aid to recovery is catching problems and mistakes early. Good project leaders monitor tasks closely and know the early warning signs of a task that is having trouble. We value employees who are open and honest about problems and are willing to address them head on. Hiding issues and failing to disclose problems risk surprising the customer and our leadership. Recall, “bad news doesn’t get better with time.” The ability to provide support and help for problem resolution diminishes with time. “Keep in mind; there is a time in the life of every problem when it is big enough to see, yet small enough to solve¹².”

Another aid to recovery is attitude. Effective recovery assumes ownership of the problem, dealing with mistakes straightforwardly, and as a matter of fact. We are to avoid blaming others or pushing issues onto someone else; such blame or making excuses is not conducive to problem resolution. Approach all situations with a “can do, take ownership” attitude that gives our customer and our senior management confidence that we are addressing the issues and working toward resolution. Our “finest hour” is when we take ownership of a problem and correct our mistakes.

How do you Know when you have Achieved Project Recovery?

The simple answer to this question may be “we know we are successful when the delivered project meets customer expectations while aligning to accepted per-Recovery Plan variances between the completing project constraints. As stated earlier, the Recovery Plan should have outlined the vision or goal of the future successful project. It’s never good – on any project – for the team to attempt hitting a moving or unknown target.

Once it has been determined that project recovery has been achieved, it is recommended that the PM and his/her Tiger Team remain intact; monitoring the project for a period of time to substantially ensure the project situation remains at condition: “normal.”

Near the end of the monitoring period, the PM, along with his/her senior management, the customer, and the PMO (if one exists) should conduct a Retrospective of the recovery effort. The purpose of this Retrospective is to identify and document: what went well, what did not go so well, what could be improved upon; in essence lessons learned exercise. This “Project <*project name*> Recovery Retrospective” document should be made available to those with need to know within the project delivery firm, in the event that a future project needs rescuing and that troubled project is of similar nature to the one just recovered. Experience is a powerful teacher. We need to glean the lessons from problems and mistakes, and not be guilty of repeating the negative history of our past.

Closing Remarks

What if we don’t catch problems and mistakes early or what if our approach to handling the problems and mistakes is not in the best interest of project stakeholders? If there is any doubt or the situation is unknown, then there is a chance our project is in trouble. Staying the course and hoping things will improve is not the answer.

Whether you are an entrepreneur leading a small business, a C-level executive at a mid-sized business, the head of the PMO, or a business manager watching out for your department, you are often in a position of having to “watch that basket,” especially with

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your most critical projects. As PMs, we too should be “watching the items in our basket,” or we run the risk of finding our project in trouble.

Although we work hard to prevent issues and problems, we realize too that the unexpected may occur with the potential to cause problems. Recovery occurs when we approach these circumstances with a positive and proactive attitude that focuses on resolution. There is really no better feeling – in the “project world” – than to have faced and resolved a difficult situation that is a benefit to the project stakeholders. I encourage you to exercise recovery when needed, and communicate effectively.

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