

Recovering Runaway Projects

In spite of people's best intentions and lots of effort projects can, and do, get out of control threatening planned completion dates, costs or the deliverables. If you find yourself in the unenviable position of having to take control of such a project, what can you do to rescue it?

Where Did We Go Wrong?

The first thing to be done is to get the Project Sponsor, the Stakeholders and the project team to recognise that the project is in trouble and to identify what is not working. For example, it may be that stakeholders are disinterested or disconnected from the project, or key members of the Project Steering Committee have stopped attending meetings where important decisions need to be made or, simply, that people have stopped doing things that they are meant to complete.

In trying to figure out what has gone wrong, it is important not to look back or attempt to allocate blame. The past is history. When mistakes have been made, we must learn the lessons and plan for the future. The aim is for the project team to stop the project from deteriorating and to secure the undertaking's future. Equally, pointing the finger of blame serves only to satisfy personal egos and does not add value to the project. As project manager, you should look to establish a "no-blame" culture where people can feel free to point out future problems. The airline industry is a good example of this type of culture.

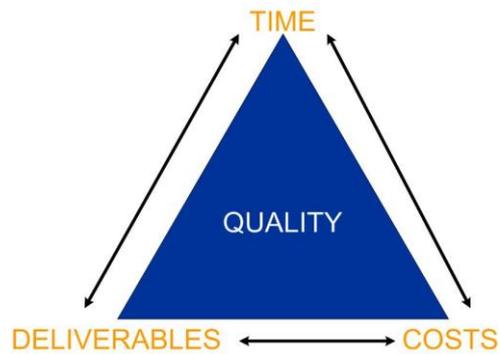
Review the project to see if its business case still makes sense, e.g. will the project deliver the functionality and the benefits originally anticipated, is the payback or Return on Investment still acceptable, can the project be completed in an acceptable timescale to satisfy the market opportunity? Do not be afraid of cancelling the project if the business case is weak.

In the public sector, the UK Treasury's Office of Government Commerce ("OGC") has developed a series of structured "Gateway" reviews for large projects designed to examine a project at critical stages in its lifecycle to provide assurance that it can progress successfully to the next stage. The process uses established techniques to ensure the effective delivery of benefits with more predictable costs and outcomes.

The Project Triangle

The options for recovering a "broken" project are governed by the interdependencies of time quality and deliverables. This is sometimes known as the Project Triangle. The key to resolving the interdependent constraints in a runaway projects is to identify which of the three elements is unchangeable. Typically, this will be the most important element in the successful completion of the project. When a project starts to go wrong, one or both of the other elements get out of control.





Quality lies at the heart of the project triangle and affects all three elements; any changes you make to a side of the triangle will almost certainly affect quality of the results. Quality is the result of what you do with time, money and deliverables. For example, if you find you have additional time in your project plan, you might be able to increase the scope of the project resulting in a higher level of quality into the project and its deliverables. Alternatively, if you need to cut costs to meet your budget, you might have to decrease the project's scope by cutting tasks or reducing task durations leading to a lower quality outcome for the project.

The interdependencies between time, cost and deliverables mean that if, for example, your project is running over budget and you do not want to sacrifice the completion dates or the quality or the project's deliverables, then you should consider renegotiating contracts with both suppliers and internal staff resources. Think about using financial incentives or time-in-lieu (for internal staff resources). Similarly, if the project is running late and the budgets cannot be extended, it might be possible to agree with stakeholders for a phased rollout of the deliverables.

The Project Team

As with so much in business, success needs good people and good people management skills. Sometimes in runaway projects, the people involved become tired and jaded. It can be worthwhile injecting new blood into the project team but not necessarily replacing the entire team. Team building and morale raising also helps, so look for early wins and celebrate these successes.

Re-introduce the Sponsor to the project and let the team see that the Sponsor cares about them and the project. Give worn-out members of the project team a few days break from the project.

It's no use saying that, if we sit around and wait, it will be all right on the night. It's much better to tell people that we are actively reviewing budgets, timescales and deliverables to ensure a successful outcome. In other words, be positive and make sure that people see that you are doing positive things.

Ralph Leishman will be delighted to discuss how we might help you to recover runaway projects. You can contact him by email at Ralph.Leishman@4-consulting.com.