



SEARCH FOR THESE FIVE CLUES

The
Case
of the

Troubled Project

TO IDENTIFY DANGER BEFORE IT WREAKS HAVOC ON YOUR PROJECT.

BY MATT ALDERTON



It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes

to know when your project is in peril—but knowing why is a different matter. Like a crime scene, troubled projects are flush with clues. To catch the culprit, a project manager must think like a detective. And that starts with knowing where to look.

“The first thing I do after a trigger event—an event that says, ‘We’re clearly in trouble’—is an assessment,” says Brian Munroe, PMP, a contractor for a series of projects and programs for the Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities, a regional planning organization in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA.

As CEO of MTI Learning Inc., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, Mr. Munroe has worked with many organizations to help get troubled projects back on track. Some of the trigger events that should lead to an assessment include missing a key milestone, loss of a vital resource, extreme cost overruns and multiple change requests, he says.

“Part of that assessment is to scour through all the project documents as a starting point.”

To get the jump on project problems, look for these five telltale signs of trouble brewing under your nose.

Muddy Waters

The project plan is the first place a project manager should look for clues to the cause of trouble. The plan should provide information on the project's goals, requirements, deliverables and processes. How clearly it outlines critical project details—not just how many it includes—can indicate whether there are potential issues, says Nah Wee Yang, PMI-ACP, PMP, managing director of Systemethod Pte. Ltd., an IT consulting firm in Singapore. “If we have to deal with excessive requirements, such as a document of 500 pages and above, that’s an early warning that a project might be mismanaged,” he says.

Part of the problem is that a lengthy and overly complex project plan will likely go unread by stakeholders. Even if it doesn't, details are easy to miss amid so much clutter. Among the most important of those details is how the project scope was communicated to key project stakeholders, Mr. Nah says. “The most common cause of troubled projects, from my experience, is that the scope is not well defined or well understood.”

To leave no room for guesswork, project managers should make sure the written scope clearly defines what the end deliverable will include—and what it will not. A scope in which project requirements are vague or incomplete raises a major red flag, Mr. Munroe says.

“Requirements are usually in the top three reasons projects get into trouble and fail,” he says. “If our requirements are not documented correctly, we don't know what, exactly, we want to build. And when we don't know what we want to build, we can't properly communicate it to our team, our vendors or anybody else.”



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Mysterious Stakeholders

Messages are most effective when they are targeted to their audience. But without a thorough stakeholder analysis, project managers can't distinguish those who prefer to get down to business and those who need more background before they provide the support that's required.

“Up-front stakeholder identification can help program or project managers identify risks and avoid problems,” says Alex Julian, PMP, senior program manager at PMI Global Executive Council member Citibank, São Paulo, Brazil.

Project managers should have two versions of their stakeholder analysis, according to Mr. Munroe: a public version that lists all stakeholders, their roles and their preferred modes of communication, and a private version that describes each stakeholder as a champion, a negative influence or a fence-sitter. This type of document can help a project manager understand who has interest and influence over a project—and who does not, Mr. Munroe says.

“Without such a document, there is the potential to one day be surprised by the actions or requests of your stakeholders that could lead to trouble in the project.”



Unconstrained Constraints

Deviations from the project timeline and budget are inevitable. But understanding how much wiggle room is available—and where delays and cost overruns can be made up—keeps a project out of the red zone. To ensure dependencies aren't compromised, highlight critical milestones that can't be delayed, says Mr. Julian.

"If you don't have a detailed project schedule, the chance of the project failing is increased exponentially," he says.

For more flexible delivery dates and costs, establish tolerance limits early to avoid pushing the schedule or budget beyond the breaking point, says Mr. Munroe. Then communicate this to the team to help with monitoring and tracking. If there's an important milestone on 1 August, for example, knowing that deliverable can't push beyond 1 September will set a guideline to measure the tolerance for delays across the board, he says.

"At that point, I know that if I'm about four weeks out on any one of my early milestone dates, I'd better be raising some flags. And I do the same with budget constraints."



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Suspicious Status Reports

A status report that lacks consistency and specifics, such as performance measurement baselines, work-in-progress metrics or completion criteria, can signify a failure to measure and control—which often spells trouble for projects.

To truly track a project's status on regular reports, Mr. Nah looks for objective measures, such as cost and schedule performance indices, to assess a project's current health and its progress.

Vague or missing metrics isn't the only warning sign, says Mr. Munroe, who looks for overly optimistic language that glosses over the specifics, using phrases like "very soon" to describe delivery dates or "marginal increases" to convey cost overruns.

"Did the individual writing the report verbally gift-wrap it?" Mr. Munroe asks. "Did he or she flower the language in such a way that it appears an executive who's reading it but doesn't really give the true status?"





Discord and Drama

Problems caused by unhappy team members are often the most difficult—and most important—to detect early on. “As a project manager, you’re wearing two hats,” Mr. Munroe explains. “You’re managing a project, but you’re also leading a team. If you’ve got unhappy team members, that could hurt your project.”

The first clue can be found in the meeting minutes. If a project manager checks the attendance record and finds consistently missing team members, that’s a potential sign of interpersonal conflict, trust issues or apathy. Also examine meeting minutes for participation levels, as perpetually quiet team members may have low morale or self-esteem issues. The minutes may also show signs of clashes between team members, such as frequent objections or confrontations. To stop team trouble before it starts, Mr. Nah suggests creating a positive team dynamic as early as possible.

“Establish ground rules for the project team,” he says. “Build up trust and respect within the team, and cultivate an open and honest feedback environment.”

However, if problems already exist, that’s a sign the environment is becoming toxic, and project managers should then talk to team members individually and foster dialogue within the group as a whole, Mr. Munroe says.

“Behind every troubled project is a troubled team, and behind every troubled team are individuals who may require support,” he says. “Be first a coach and mentor to these people as you lead them. After all, a project manager is just another name for leader.” **PM**

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SHIFTING GEARS

Once you’ve spotted trouble heading your way, changing directions can help you avoid a collision course. The following tips can help project managers put troubled projects on the road to recovery:

- If team members are struggling with certain tasks or relationships, try moving them to a new role that plays to their strengths.
- Get schedules back on track by performing tasks that are normally completed sequentially simultaneously, instead.
- Increase stakeholder communication with new or more frequent project reports.
- Meet with team members and stakeholders more frequently to avoid miscommunications and wasted effort.
- Hire external support to assist with administrative tasks or to introduce new tools, systems and workflows.

Whatever you do, don’t stop the project, says Brian Munroe, PMP, MTI Learning Inc., St. Paul, Minnesota, USA.

“A lot of people say that if a project’s in trouble, you need to put the brakes on it and figure out what’s wrong,” he says. “I don’t stop it. I need to observe it. I need to see people doing what they’re doing correctly and what they’re doing incorrectly so I can exploit the good and correct the not-so-good.”