

# IS YOUR PROJECT REALLY DOOMED TO FAIL?

Brenda L. Taylor, MS, PMP



***FAIL***

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## Abstract

This paper discusses different ways projects are known to fail, and how standard project management practices can help you address those failures. As a project manager, if your project is in trouble you want practical experience based help that you can implement right away. This paper will walk you through how to assess your problems, and then evaluate what solutions would work best, based on your situation. Standard project management practices can save most projects. Projects may be unique, however, there are enough similarities that employing standard practices can help you make amazing changes to a failing project.

## Introduction

There are plenty of articles out there that talk about why projects fail, but few talk about practical, real world solutions for what you can do to fix those problems. Some articles tell you that there are a top 3 reasons, some say there are 5 others 10, for the person experiencing it, you really don't care how many things can cause the failure – you just want it fixed (and now).

So, if you're the person facing failure, let's start with the most obvious – STOP and take a DEEP breath. Why is this important? You can't think clearly when you are stressed. Your team can sense your anxiety, and you need to have a clear head to solve this problem.

Now that you have taken a deep breath, and hopefully backed off the ledge, we can start talking about potential project pitfalls, how to assess your own project and most importantly how project management can help.

## Let's start with "What could potentially go wrong?"

As mentioned in the intro, there are many things that can cause a project to go off the rails. The list below will give you a general idea of what can cause a project to fail "in part" or completely.

- No project charter
- No business case or project justification
- Project expectations for budgets or dates are unrealistic
- Resource issues: not enough, not qualified or resources are overallocated
- Sponsor not engaged, or your project has no governance structure
- Scope is constantly changing or no change control

- Stakeholders for the project are unknown or not defined
- No one knows what project success looks like
- No risk assessment
- No thought of a recovery plan
- No project schedule
- No one is steering the ship
- Inexperienced project manager
- Poorly tested system
- Lessons learned ignored
- Training not part of the plan
- No transition plan
- Requirements are incomplete or inaccurate
- Critical path not understood
- Project assumptions or project constraints unknown
- Task dependencies unknown
- Internal politics impacting decision making
- Lack of subject matter experts (SMEs)
- Cultural or language barriers
- Government agencies influences underestimated
- Decisions made at the wrong level

The fact that this is a long list should give you an idea of the things that can go wrong, and how easy it is to find a project going down the wrong path. But, don't worry – we will get to some potential solutions a little later.

### Now let's try to simplify this list

Although the list may seem long, it is by no means complete. I'm sure there are lots of other reasons why projects fail, but I believe this list covers a good representation of main causes. To help simplify what we are talking about I'm going to break it down into categories. This process will allow us to focus our energy on a few primary solutions.

Categories below include:

1. Resources
2. Planning / scheduling
3. Governance
4. Scope / direction
5. Communications / stakeholders
6. Risk management

I'm hoping this sound familiar. PMI's "*A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Sixth Edition*" documents all this, and will tell you how to work through and deal with each one. This article is by no means meant to replace even a portion the PBMOK. I believe it is extremely important to understand the "science" behind project management. This article is just intended to help bring more of an experiential view to a somewhat more "theoretical" approach to project management.

## Now let's talk about Your Project

Now that you have had an opportunity to look at the items that could potentially go wrong with most projects, it's your turn. The number one thing that needs to be done, is an HONEST assessment of where you are today, which of these issues you're dealing with, and remember there may be more than one. The most difficult thing to come to grips with as a project manager is that the problem might be YOU. Don't worry, this paper will help you work through both the assessment, and potential solutions. Remember even the most inexperienced project managers are just great project managers "in training".

The first thing you need to do is an assessment. I believe that there are three things that need to be reviewed. The first is somewhat perception based but very valuable. This will be done through interviews. The second is more of an objective review of your current project management deliverables, and the third is a review of your governance and resources. You will need to understand all three to effectively evaluate where you are today. Once the assessment is done we can look at how project management can help.

## Assessment 1 - interviews

Since in most cases "perception is reality", the first place to start is by asking questions. This may feel a little awkward, especially if you are in the middle of a project that's been running for some time, but you need to understand key stakeholder perceptions. This information will be KEY

in helping you assess your true overall project health, communication plan and other important project deliverables.

To give you some perspective - in my first large project as a project manager, I was a year in when one of my key stakeholders mentioned that he had spoken to my team. He could tell that they were not aligned with the goals of the project, and in fact, felt they didn't even know what those goals were. I was furious, I thought he was just being difficult, till I spoke to my team. He was right. I had never clearly articulated the full scope of the project to the people doing the work. This has been, without a doubt, one of the most important things I have ever learned as a project manager. It doesn't matter how much I know about a project – It only matters how much everyone else knows. Communication is critical to success. So, talking with your key stakeholders will help find the gaps that you never knew where there and help measure both the awareness and the stress levels of each of these key stakeholders. This information will be important when determining what needs to be done.

Begin by making a list of your key stakeholders. There are a few that are more critical than others, for example – your sponsor, should be one of the first people you talk with. If you have a business lead or technical lead, I would go to that person next. Talk to key people on your team, get their perspective. If they feel overwhelmed or feel like your project is very chaotic, this is a great indicator as to some of the things you need to work on. You need to understand their view of the project and what issues they see are getting in the way of making this project a success. (Other possible groups to interview could include; contractors, vendors, steering team members).

Potential interview topics:

- What do they view as the real project status?
- What do they see as major threats both now and in the future?
- What do they think should be done to bring the project back on track?
- What constraints do they see that may not already be identified?
- Ask if they clearly understand their role on the project and what they are responsible for.
- Discuss your communication plan and make sure you understand what their requirements are for information, how often they need it and how they want to receive it.

The key to this part of the assessment is to really **listen** to people, not just to what they have to say but how they say it. Especially, when talking with your team – these are the people you are asking to get work done so their emotional wellbeing is an important component to how you fix your issues.

Also, make sure that you leave enough time for these discussions. Don't schedule a 30-minute conversation when you know you need 60.

## Assessment 2 - deliverables

Once you have done your interviews, the second type of assessment is to look at your current deliverables. What is a deliverable in this case? I'm talking about your project documents or artifacts, as some people call them. You need to take a hard look at what you have, and how it is being used. This assessment is something that should be done on your own. These deliverables are the responsibility of the project manager. In my mind, this is where you should be grading yourself, and looking to see where you can improve. I know some project managers that don't use all these documents, primarily because they either don't feel they add value. I will tell you they all have a purpose, and will provide real benefits if used correctly. If you are not using one or more of these standard project management deliverables you need to do two things during this assessment;

- Ask you self "Why", why do you believe that it's not valuable to your project
- Look back at your issues, and see if the problems you're having could be linked to not using this deliverable.

During your review – here is a list of general questions that you need to ask about each one.

- Are you using this deliverable?
- How was this deliverable approved?
- How was it communicated to your team? to leadership? to key stakeholders?
- Are you updating your project schedule / budget when changes happen to this deliverable?
- Is this deliverable being updated regularly?

<i>Deliverable</i>	<i>What is the Document used for?</i>
<i>(Project Documentation)</i>	
<i>Project Charter</i>	Sets Project direction / Baseline, it includes and overview of the project, in scope and out of scope, assumptions, constraints, high-level risks, milestones, resources and budget
<i>Business Case</i>	Documents the business need, the market assessment, proposed solutions with financial and technical options and a recommendation
<i>Project Schedule</i>	Documents the overall schedule of the project and is used to drive the work
<i>Success Criteria</i>	Documents the expectations for project success by key stakeholders
<i>Quality Control</i>	Manages project output quality
<i>Status Reports</i>	Documents current project status, current risks, milestones, task highlights and upcoming activities
<i>Risk / Issues Log</i>	Documents risks with their probability / impact, mitigations if indicated and ownership. It also documents Issues, actions and ownership
<i>Scope Change Log</i>	Document proposed and approved changes to your baseline scope, impact analysis and approvals

<i>Decision Log</i>	Records key decisions made during the project, when they were made, who was involved in the decision and what prompted the decisions to be made
<i>Stakeholder List</i>	Identification of key project stakeholders, their role on the project, their role in the business and how they need to be communicated to. If possibly, other good information to gather about key stakeholders includes; what major concerns they have about the project, what they view as the biggest risk impacting the project and how do they view success.
<i>Communications Plan</i>	Documents every audience that the project needs to communicate with, how that communication will happen, who is responsible for communicating, what will be included in the communication and how often the communication will be done.
<i>Change Management Plan</i>	Documents the organizational change, resources needed to implement the change, leadership support, training required, resistance to change, communications plans and metrics to measure progress
<i>Budget Controls</i>	This is really based on the requirements of the company doing the project, but typically would include information around capital and expense forecasts, accruals, actuals, invoices and PO's.
<i>RACI</i>	Documents the roles and responsibilities of the project team

## Assessment 3 – governance and resources

### Governance

These next two areas can have a significant impact on your projects success, but should be easy to assess. Typically, with something like governance you either have the good healthy functional structure, or you don't.

Project governance is expected to provide “oversight, control, integration and decision making”<sup>i</sup> for a project. Also, according to the PMBOK®, governance is “The framework, functions, and processes that guide project management activities”<sup>ii</sup>. So, what does that mean to you, and what questions do you need to ask yourself to quickly assess your project?

- Do you have a governing body that supports the project like a steering team?
  - Do they help with decision making?
  - Do they provide oversight – do they help provide direction when needed?
  - Do they actively participate?
  - Do they feel personally invested in the project? Do they even care what happens to your project?
  - Do they provide guidance around project risks that are affecting the project?
  - Do they view your project as strategic?
  - Who leads your steering team meetings?
  - Who else on your team participates in the meetings?
- Do you have a sponsor?
  - Is the sponsor actively involved in the project?

- Is your project important to your sponsor? Do they have a vested interest in the success of the project?
- Do you meet with them on a regular basis? Do they understand the details of the project?
- How comfortable do you feel discussing risk / issues with your sponsor
- What role does the sponsor play in helping steer the ship?
- Is your sponsor an active participant in your steering team meetings?

## Resources

Project resources can be a complicated topic when you first setup a project team. You not only have to assess who you need, but also what capabilities are required. Typically, it seems like 9 times out of 10 you are given people to work on your project that are available, not necessarily the most capable. When doing this type of assessment – you need to look at your project a little differently. You now need to assess where you are today, and if you can continue the project with the team you have.

Secondly, and probably most importantly, you need to do an assessment of yourself as the project manager. If you don't, someone will do it for you. This needs to be an honest assessment to determine what you need to be successful.

- Your Team (The first thing you need to do is identify your key resources)
  - Do those key resources they have enough time to dedicate on your project or are they over allocated?
  - Do they have all the skills they need, or do they need training?
  - Are there other key resources that your project is missing?
  - Can you use contractors (outside resources)?
  - How are their stress levels?
  - How often do you meet with your team? Is it a regular cadence?
  - Are you sharing the right amount of information with your team?
    - Is the information in a timely manner? For example – are you sending them regular updates to the project schedule so that they know what is coming due over a short-term timeframe (2-3 weeks) and what is due over a longer-term timeframe (2-3 months)?



- Team Structure / Team Dynamics
  - Are there Individual / or team conflicts that need to be managed or resolved
  - Are there team members that are toxic to the project – keep in mind these may be some of your highest performing resources. This can be one of the most difficult decisions to make on a project and normally one of the most beneficial to the entire team.
  
- Yourself
  - What training do YOU need? General project management training or more specific training, like training in MS Project for example, or conflict management?
  - Are you feeling overwhelmed? What do you think is causing that? Where do you feel are the gaps?
  - Is there someone that you can use as a mentor that would help you through this project?
  - Do you need other assistance on the project? Finance for example – may not be your strength, think about bringing in someone for a small percent of their time to help.

## How can project management help?

### Let's talk about Deliverables

There are certain documents (deliverables) that every project should use. These are what I would consider **non-negotiables**. So, regardless of the size, type, or industry a project comes from, these deliverables are considered project management best practices and should be included in your project.

#### Project non-negotiables

<i>Deliverable</i>	<i>Developed by whom*</i>	<i>What is critical about this deliverable?</i>
<i>Project charter</i>	Sponsor / Project manager	Must be <u>approved</u> by the governing body.
<i>Project schedule</i>	Project manager / Team	Updated regularly, communicated regularly, used to drive team meetings
<i>Quality controls</i>	Project manager / Team	Quality controls are determined by the type of project, how much testing is needed and what type of testing is needed. Quality controls should include validation from the customer.
<i>Status report</i>	Project manager / Team	Communicated regularly, updates provided by the project team, should always include risk information
<i>Risk / Issue log</i>	Project manager / Team	Updated regularly, risks identified on every status report, high risks communicated at every steering team meeting (or steering team communication)
<i>Scope change log</i>	Project manager / Team	The project charter is the baseline, updated as scope changes, used to help determine if schedule or budget changes are needed

<i>Stakeholder list</i>	Project manager / Sponsor / Team	Reviewed regularly by project manager to ensure that all stakeholders are involved and communicated to required
<i>Communication plan</i>	Sponsor / Project manager	Reviewed regularly by project manager to ensure proper and complete communications
<i>Budget controls</i>	Sponsor / Project manager	Updated regularly, communicated regularly

\*at least by whom – you can have more people participate in the development of a deliverable – but these are the bare minimum critical resources that should participate

## Optional Deliverables

There are certain documents that certain project managers will chose not to use. I would consider these as optional. However, they still do have a purpose, it just depends on the project and its specific needs.

<i>Deliverable</i>	<i>Developed by whom*</i>	<i>Important about this deliverable?</i>
<i>Business Case</i>	Sponsor / Project manager	The larger the project, the more expensive or more disruptive it will be to your company, the more a business case is needed. Justification should be defined as to why projects are being established.
<i>Success criteria</i>	Project manager with key stakeholders	Helps clarify project expectations by key stakeholders. This is one clear way a project manager can understand when he has met his objectives, and what “Winning” looks like.
<i>Decision Log</i>	Project manager	Updated as needed, communicated as needed, important part of tracking key decisions throughout the life of a long running project
<i>Change management plan</i>	Project manager / Sponsor	The more disruptive a change is to a company the more important this document is
<i>RACI</i>	Project manager / Team	This is most useful for new teams, or onboarding new members.

\*at least by whom – you can have more people participate in the development of a deliverable – but these are the bare minimum critical resources that should participate

## Governance

### Sponsor

Sponsorship changes or issues are probably the most difficult to deal with on a project. When the person responsible for championing the project is changing or has left what do you do? When you are not getting the support from the sponsor that you need, what do you do? When your sponsor is just not engaged in the project, what do you do?

- The first thing that you need to do is identify if the issue with the sponsor has to do with training or education? Do they understand their role? If not, then you need to look at onboarding your sponsor. You need to educate them as to what their role is, and what their responsibilities are.

- If that's not the problem, and they are just not engaged, or your project is just not a priority for them, you need to get help from someone else. I would recommend leaning on your own leadership. At this point, you need the help of other senior leaders to help solve this problem.

### Governing Body

You will need to work with your sponsor to identify if your project needs a governing body, or if it will be only governed by the sponsor. How can you help your sponsor make that determination?

Some contributing factors:

- How critical is it to the success of your company's overall objectives?
- How risky is the project?
- How complicated is the project?
- How integrated is the project throughout the company? Does it cover multiple functions?
- Does this project impact other projects / other corporate initiatives?
- Does it need to be done quickly?
- Does it need oversight for other reasons?

Once you have determined if you need a governing body, you need to figure out a few other things:

- How should you communicate with this group?  
(Email? Face-to-Face Meetings? Virtual Meetings?)
- Who is involved in the communication? (Steering Team Members, sponsor, yourself, different team members?)
- Who leads the meeting?
- How often do you need to communicate?
- What information do you need to share?

A lot of this depends on your project, how critical it is to the company, the point you are in the project, and how quickly you need to get things done. You need to keep all these things in mind when determining the cadence for communications, and the mode in which you plan to communicate. One of the most important considerations with any Steering Team meeting has to do with the "What" information you need to share with this group. Make sure you are sharing the right level of information, and not wasting their time with information not relevant to the goal of the meeting.

One other tip that I have found very helpful with my projects and with the people I have involved in the governance of my projects – has to do with “Pre-meetings”. If you have a subject that you believe may be difficult or confrontational, it is recommended that you have individual conversations with some or all your steering team members before the steering team meeting, to allow them time to discuss the project and the topic with you and possibly the sponsor prior to the meeting. This could save you major headaches, and help you be much better prepared in all your governance discussions.

## Resources

### Managing your team

When running a project, regardless of how large or small that project is, a project manager is only as successful as the team helps him / her become. So, your project team is a critical component to your overall project success. I have found that keeping a close connection with my team helps me evaluate the health of the project on a much deeper level. I’m not talking about micromanaging your team, I’m talking about listening to their feedback and concerns.

- If the team is feeling overwhelmed, take some time to go over the project schedule and work through it again with the team and find out what is causing the anxiety.
- If they are feeling things are chaotic, take another look at your communication plan and make sure you are communicating what your team needs to hear, and when.
- Consider adding more touch bases to ease their concerns.
- Make sure the team understands the project schedule in detail, listen to specific questions to try and understand where they may be getting confused.
- Review the charter and business case with the team, help them understand the overall reason why the project is being done, and ask the sponsor to come and answer any questions they may have about the project.
- Make sure you are dealing with each risk your team brings to your attention. You may not have to mitigate each one, but you do need to acknowledge each risk. You need to work the process and have the team identify both probability and impact just like any other risk. This work will help your team feel that their issues are being listened to and addressed and should help to ease some of their concerns.

## Helping Yourself

Now it's your turn. If you're the project manager on this project, it is important that you have the skills that you need to be successful. Just like any other critical team member, you need to be capable enough to do your job. There are a few things that I would recommend getting yourself up to speed as quickly as possible: (based on your self-assessment)

- If basic project management skills are needed – look at taking a boot camp. Boot camps can be a little costly, but it is one of the best ways to get all the things you need to learn in a very short, condensed period of time. Make sure that you look for a PMI accredited training company. If you are going to spend the money – make sure that you are getting the right level of training
- If more advanced skills training is needed, or training in a specific tool is needed (like MS Project), look for a 1 to 2-day training class that covers any gap that you identified.
- If you need assistance in an area that you are less skilled in, like finance, for example, ask for a part time resource to be brought in to add that skill to the team, and offload some work that you are stressing over.
- Look for a mentor if you don't already have one. A more senior level mentor that will not only help you with your career, but can also serve as a sounding board for questions you may have about dealing with executive sponsors, or people on your steering team.

Make sure that you take your self-assessment and create a plan for each gap you identify. You will want to review your plan with your sponsor, and your leadership.

## Summary

Project Management is a process and a set of tools that can be used at the beginning of a project to help set it up, manage, control and wrap up a project. They can also be used to help rescue a project. There are so many things that can go wrong, but as a project manager you need to do an honest assessment, and take advantage of the tools at your disposal. Most struggling projects can be fixed, it just takes effort and the right support. I hope this article helped you both assess what issues you may be facing, and how you could begin to solve them.

There is a lot of “art” to project management, but you can't forget the science. There are reasons for everything we do, just some things add more value than others. You need to figure out which of these value-added resources help you the most and now add those to what you do in every project.

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<sup>i</sup> *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Sixth Edition* (Project Management Institute, 2017, p. 44

<sup>ii</sup> *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Sixth Edition* (Project Management Institute, 2017, p. 715