Overcoming a Project Management Crisis

Program & Project Management Perspective
GIVEN THE NATURE OF PROJECT-BASED WORK, YOU WILL INEVITABLY COME ACROSS MORE RISKS AS THE PROJECT PROGRESSES.
We’ve all been there. You’re over halfway through your project implementation. The project has gone fairly well. Sure, there have been a few small bumps along the road, but you’ve addressed each one and mostly managed to keep a green status as you progress towards the finish line. But now, one of your risks has manifested into a critical issue. What do you do?

This can be a stressful situation and the natural response is to be reactive and make quick decisions. However, an issue that is not addressed at its core will continue to resurface throughout the duration your project.

According to a recent study, only 39% of projects succeed. Of the remaining projects, 43% are challenged and 18% fail. These projects can be affected by one or many project issues. According to the same study, the top cause for project failure is changing priorities (40%), with inaccurate requirements (38%) and changing project objectives (35%) closely following.
To overcome project challenges, we recommend a four-step approach to addressing this situation that enables you and your project stakeholders to make informed decisions that address the true source of the problem and truly move past it.

1. **ASSESS THE LANDSCAPE**

When project issues arise, it is easy to make assumptions about how to best address them. This is a natural result when working so closely to the project at a very detailed level. We think that we are the experts, so we make quick, reactive decisions on how to handle issues in order to move forward without losing momentum. This is a mistake.

When major issues arise, the first step should be to step away from the situation and assess the entire landscape. What truly caused this problem? As a project manager or project team member, you likely will not have all of the information required to answer this question. It is important to understand the unique perspectives of all parties involved.

To do this, we recommend conducting a breakthrough session: a blame-free meeting involving all project stakeholders which allows team members to discuss the project as a whole. The session should be facilitated by a senior organization member who has not been included in the project but understands the project goals to ensure that preconceived notions will not sway the direction of the conversation. It is important to focus the discussion around the project as a whole and not just “the issue”. This will allow you to remove biases from the discussion and frequently you will find that the cause of the issue is something completely different from what you had expected. The “breakthrough” moment in your session will allow you to move forward to make decisions that will address the root cause and brainstorm solutions to prevent this issue moving forward.

2. **DETERMINE YOUR OPTIONS**

- Issue root cause(s)
- Issue solution and prevention
- Strategic objectives
- Understanding of project priorities
- List of go-forward options

3. **MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION**

- List of go-forward options
- Option benefit analysis
- Key stakeholder buy-in
- Go-forward plan

4. **MOVE FORWARD WITH LESSONS LEARNED**

- Go-forward plan
- Lessons learned
- Root cause issue resolution
- Project progress and execution
For example, at one particular client, we were working with an IT vendor to do a customized system build and implementation. After 6 months on the project, frustrations were high as both the client’s IT department and the vendor were consistently missing deadlines and delivering work products that did not meet the business’s requirements. The business was being treated as the “middle-man” between the vendor and IT; as these two groups were continuously blaming each other for project issues.

A breakthrough session was conducted to discuss the project. It was an open forum for all project team members. Titles and roles held no bearing, the purpose was simply to provide a safe environment for everyone to explain their perspective without placing blame on any one person or team. From this session, we found that the issue, at its core, was not missed deadlines or tensions between teams, but a lack of project management and ownership. This particular project had experienced high turnover and the executive team had changed direction on project ownership and management. However, this transition was never fully executed and as a result, everyone was leading their workstreams, but no one was leading the project. After assessing the landscape to make this breakthrough, we were able to move on to the next step.

2. DETERMINE YOUR OPTIONS

Once you’ve identified the true cause of your issue, you must determine what your options are for addressing it. This can be difficult because typically each of your options will have tradeoffs and you must determine what is most important in moving forward. Typically, the tradeoffs come in one of the three categories within the project triple constraint: scope, cost, and time. When experiencing a project crisis, moving one of these will impact the others. You can decide to condense the timeline, but will likely have to reduce the scope of the project. Conversely, you can expand the scope of the project, however, in most cases this will result in higher costs and/or longer timelines. Difficult decisions always come down to understanding all options and determining what tradeoffs suit your unique situation. However, it is important to always consider overall strategic objectives of the organization to ensure that whatever options is selected, it aligns with this overarching strategy.

In the previous example, we did not have clear project ownership or management. There were three distinct workstreams on this project: the vendor, IT, and the business. Adding this responsibility to any of the three workstreams would increase the scope of work for that team and as a result, the time required for them to deliver their work. The decision-makers had to determine which group could best absorb and execute upon this responsibility. This brings us to the third step in our approach.

3. MAKE AN INFORMED DECISION

If you appropriately assess the landscape and ensure that you have considered all options, making your decision about how to move forward should be the easiest step. Consider the tradeoffs outlined in step 2 and determine which of the options best suits this particular project and/or organization. It is important to clarify how the issue and the recommended resolution alternatives impact the project’s original business goals, expected business value, and business priorities in order to make the best decision. This is the most straightforward way to find the “right” balance between cost, scope, and time. It also keeps the project team’s focus united on common concerns rather than differences of opinions about tactics.
Before finalizing your decision, you should ensure that you have buy-in from key stakeholders. To do this, it is critical to be able to clearly articulate the options that were considered, the tradeoffs for each, and the reasoning behind your final recommendation. It is helpful to rank your options from most recommended to least in case your stakeholders disagree with your recommendation. In that scenario, you will then be prepared to discuss the next most desirable option and the tradeoffs to consider before committing to that decision. Once a recommendation is made and signed off on by all key stakeholders you are ready to move forward.

*During our project, we had three options as to who should own and manage the project moving forward. When considering the tradeoff of the expanded scope of work for each workstream, we reviewed the current workload for each as well as the existing capabilities within each team. It was determined that managing the project moving forward would best fit into the existing scope of work for the business.*

*As the business had more bandwidth, a vested interest in the success of the project, and existing expertise within the team in project management, the stakeholders agreed that though it would expand their scope of work and required extended timelines for certain deliverables, that they were best suited to lead the project moving forward. It was then time to execute on this decision.*

**4. MOVE FORWARD WITH LESSONS LEARNED**

After making a difficult decision, a common mistake that project teams make is to move forward and quickly brush past challenges under the rug to be forgotten. While it is important to continue to make progress, you must always reflect on the past and draw out key lessons learned in order to ensure that the same mistakes aren’t repeated down the road. As is the nature of project-based work, you will inevitably come across more risks as the project progresses. The key is to learn from past issues and apply those lessons learned to the risk in order to mitigate it before it escalates into another crisis.

*During our example project, it was decided and agreed upon by all parties that the business would be accountable for the project management moving forward. The business quickly stepped up to the plate and met with each workstream to understand workload, timelines, and status before revising the project plan and project structure to move forward with a fresh start.*

*For a few weeks, everyone was on their best behavior; delivered quality work on time, communicated proactively, and showed accountability for their work. However, soon afterward the vendor started missing their commitments. With the new project ownership structure, the business was empowered to confront the vendor and establish daily stand-ups to increase accountability and keep the project on schedule.*
KEY TAKEAWAYS

When executing project-based work, you will inevitably encounter risks and some of those risks will become issues. In the worst cases those issues become a project crisis. While difficult, teams can overcome these challenges and continue the path to a successful project execution by addressing the situation with these key activities:

- **Step away to assess the entire landscape.** As project managers, we are very close to our work and typically “in the weeds”. It is important to step away to gain a fresh, unbiased perspective before moving forward.

- **Understand your options and tradeoffs.** There is likely no easy answer. Each option will have pros and cons associated with it. Take the time to explore all possibilities with stakeholders to prioritize options for consideration.

- **Make an informed decision.** Often times, quick decisions leave a better option on the table. Take time and make the investment to understand and consider all options with all stakeholders; thus ensuring that you are choosing the correct path forward.

- **Move forward with your decision and incorporate lessons learned to prevent a relapse.**

  There is a delicate balance when moving forward with your decision. It is important to move on and not harbor bad feelings related to your issue. However, you must always remember the lessons learned to ensure that the problems do not repeat themselves.

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