

How Healthy is your Project?

Projects don't always go as planned.

Sometimes, despite the team's best efforts and good management, the project becomes progressively late, spending well beyond the original budget with growing stakeholder dissatisfaction. And sometimes, a troubled project falls into crisis.

When this happens, team dynamics become highly sensitized and work pressures push the team to the breaking point. A different management style is required, as simply doing more of the same won't work. Two important questions must be asked: What are the warning signs that a project is falling into trouble and what can be done to help it recover?

Any project can fall into four possible states of health.

Healthy



The Scenario

The work and costs are tracking to plan and the team is delivering on its commitments. The stakeholders are involved and satisfied with the progress shown. The project may have experienced issues or delays, but these have been managed effectively.

What's Going On

The project is an example of the behaviour and success desired for all initiatives.

Action Required

Continue using good management practices and maintain positive working relationships within the team and with their business partners, stakeholders and clients.

Challenged



The Scenario

Some key deadlines have been missed, work quality is suffering, some of the team are struggling with their roles, and critical roles may be vacant. Costs are increasing without good cause. Tension is building across the team. Staff turnover is affecting productivity.

What's Going On

Often, compounding problems will make a good plan difficult to achieve. The warning signs show up in the project's weak spots first, which may be its

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management processes, communications, organizational structure, work plan, or many other things.

Action Required

Apply the fundamental project management disciplines to track its efforts against the plan, control the shifting scope and to manage the project risks and issues. Often the communications mechanisms can be improved to more clearly report actual progress and to anticipate roadblocks.

Troubled



The Scenario

The project is at real risk of not achieving its objectives. Is well behind schedule and past attempts to address this have not succeeded. There are serious concerns with the quality of deliverables. No matter how hard the team works or the project budget has grown, they seem to be plagued with one issue after another. The sponsor may still be a champion, but is losing faith in the project's business case.

What's Going On

Stress is building as the process, people and support systems are pushed beyond normal limits.

Action Required

Revisit the work effort estimates to ensure if they are realistic. Update the business case to test its viability and decide whether the project should continue. Refocus efforts on the core work scope and stop all work that does not contribute to it. Evaluate the effectiveness of the tracking and control mechanisms. The project may require special attention to put it back on track.

Critical



The Scenario

All project float, grace periods and client tolerance limits have been exceeded. Sometimes these projects cannot be stopped because they are so important to the organization, which has allowed more time for the highly troubled project to fall into crisis. Success is imperative but improbable.

What's Going On

Significant failure points have appeared and the project is at threat of being cancelled or it will have a drastic effect on the organization.

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Action Required Significant intervention is required to save the project. Crisis management tactics may be necessary such as the introduction of a turn-around manager or the performance of Critical Project Recovery. A re-launch of the project may be necessary to give it a fresh start.

What can be done?

1. Prevention

The best way to strengthen a project is to create an environment that maximized potential for success, such as:

Ensure the project team has the skills and experience required for the project.

Appropriate planning, tracking and control processes are in place and are being used.

Create a culture of success around the project - sponsors are championing the cause, adequate funding exists, healthy team working relationships, and some flexibility in cost, schedule or scope.

2. Correction

A Project Success Assurance Review will assess the project's health and determine the likelihood of achieving its objectives. It is a forward-looking feedback mechanism to test the effectiveness of the project management methods and approach, identify barriers to success and plan corrective action. The review team should be completely independent of the project team, but accountable to the same executive sponsor.

3. Recovery

Just like curing a health illness, project recovery begins with diagnosis, introduction of remedies and sometimes requires significant intervention such as a Critical Project Recovery. CPR is a process to re-launch a troubled or crisis project, often using dramatic techniques.

