

The Post-Mortem You Never Want: How to Determine Findings from a Troubled Project^{1, 2}

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Project closeout reports, reports from turn-around managers on troubled projects, audit reports and project post-mortems all seem to have recurring findings. These findings can be used to help establish strong, sound project management procedures and act as a guide for effective management of a project.

Alternatively, the lessons of the past can be ignored and these findings can serve as a checklist for the auditor or manager looking at a troubled project. Clearly an ounce of prevention is the desired course of action.

While the “findings” that follow are not all encompassing, they provide a framework for project managers, functional leads and corporate management to assess whether a project is experiencing one or more of the findings common to many troubled projects. Used preventatively, it can help catch problems as they are emerging and before the real damage has been done.

For turnaround manager’s and project auditor’s, this list will unfortunately give them a head start in structuring their report!

Findings On A Troubled Project

1. Failing to Adequately Plan:

- Poorly defined objectives lead to weak planning
- Weak planning leads to inefficiency and rework
- Plan without the end clearly understood
- Plan not utilized or kept up to date

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2. Weak Communications:

- Stakeholders not fully defined
- Communication plan for individual stakeholder groups not fully in place
- Frequency and completeness of communication does not meet stakeholder's needs
- Communication plan and efforts not updated or fail to evolve through project lifecycle
- Communication approach provides insufficiently for "active listening"
- Project status not communicated frequently and in detail

3. Failing to Get Adequate Team Buy-in:

- Top-down planning creates perception of "expediting"
- Limited team buy-in delays "front line" decisions, acceptance of responsibility and constructive suggestions and feedback
- Lack of required team skills may not be identified early on

4. Team Skills Don't Meet Project Needs:

- Skill gaps not identified
- "Hope" adapted as a strategy
- Changed project needs not reflected in plan or team skills mix

5. No One is Responsible:

- Roles and responsibilities in project execution not articulated
- Control of "white spaces" not addressed
- Support mechanisms not identified or in place
- Penalty for "taking personal risks" outweighs penalty for "failing to take personal risk" (retribution vs. reward culture)

6. Performance Metrics not Effectively Used:

- "True Condition" of project (or portion) is not known
- Work performance metrics foster "debate on data" versus focus on performance improvement
- Accountability not linked to performance
- Communication and collaboration metrics not established for cross functional activities
- Importance of safety and quality to overall efficiency not addressed by metrics

7. Team Culture Not Defined, Communicated, Established or Supported:

- Negative behaviors are tolerated
- Difficulty of cultural change not appreciated
- Team building never completed

- Feedback mechanism to assess “team” performance not in place

8. Plan Not Sufficiently Developed:

- Notion that the “devil is in the details” is not heeded
- Planning not to a level that allows gaps, conflicts or opportunities to become apparent
- Planning assumptions not stress tested by detailed plan development
- Productivity, cost, schedule details based on “historical means” versus current or forecast “realities”

9. Failure to Fully Assess and Manage Risks:

- Quantitative risks not comprehensively assessed
- Over reliance on “factors” from prior projects without understanding differences between projects
- Event risks not adequately addressed
- “Known unknowns” not factored into risk analysis
- Management actions to mitigate or manage risks not developed or articulated
- Indirect consequences of risks not considered (Project disruption)
- Contingency planning and provision not vigorously done
- Plan to manage “unknown unknowns” (crisis planning) not done

10. Critical Path Not Understood:

- Project priorities and requirement for achievement not well developed
- Resources not allocated to clearly support critical path
- Intermediate milestones not clearly understood or communicated
- Events impacting or potentially impacting critical path not understood or communicated in a timely manner

11. Schedule Does Not Reflect Realities of Project:

- “Political” dates bear no resemblance to project approach or resource loading
- Morale impact of unrealistic dates and intermediate milestones not appreciated
- Project sequencing and decision time frames not understood
- External schedule drivers and constraints not adequately considered
- Interdependences not adequately reflected in project schedule

12. Quality Management Culture Not Built Into Project:

- Quality Plan not developed at outset of project
- Quality activities not flowed down into all project elements
- Quality requirements not extended throughout supply chain
- Timely identification of quality affecting issues does not occur
- Corrective action plans not developed or effectively implemented

13. Inadequate Project Management Skills:

- Required skills not clearly understood at outset of project
- Skill gaps not identified
- Inadequate training to close skills gaps
- Inadequate ongoing performance assessment of management skills

14. Dysfunctional Project Organization:

- No clear lines of authority
- Lack of empowerment
- Silos impede project performance
- Lack of timely information sharing
- Poor interpersonal relationships or lack of trust

15. Project Management Framework Systems Not in Place or Appropriately Utilized

- Necessary systems and tools not put in place at outset of project
- Framework systems are not adequately integrated and do not provide timely and comprehensive “view” of the project.
- Framework systems are not being utilized and local tools contain unintegrated information important to management of project and assessment of performance

16. Project Execution Lacks Rigor:

- Individual WBS elements or activities have not been rigorously planned
- Early and late start scenarios not considered
- Pre-conditions to undertaking an activity not well understood
- Decisions not made in a timely fashion
- “Paralysis by analysis” is accepted as substitute for informed risk taking
- Changes and their inevitable disruption are not managed
- Priorities “float” or no process for re-prioritization of project exists
- Resource allocation does not match stated priorities
- Resource hoarding tolerated
- Organizational or process silos not broken down

17. Project Execution Bottlenecks not Aggressively Addressed:

- Telltale signs of people, process or physical bottlenecks not recognized or ignored
- Unwillingness to deal with difficult people or change or failed processes
- Team member concerns have no effective channel to management level where they can be addressed
- Information is funneled or hoarded

18. Project Reporting Does Not Support Project Delivery

- Project reports focus on quantity of information versus quality of information
- Project reports do not track open item status and commitments at an appropriate level of detail
- Cross cutting project trends and issues not readily identified

19. Audit Process Not Used to Support Project Execution:

- Focused on playing “gotcha” instead of supporting project improvement
- Project team not involved in defining areas of audit, frequency, and areas of focus at outset of project to support their needs
- Not seen as valuable tool by project team
- Frequency of audits inadequate to provide input for timely course correction
- Expertise of audit team inadequate or not respected by project team

20. Training Not Viewed as an Ongoing Activity:

- Work Process implemented on ad hoc basis
- No consistency of approach
- No feedback loops to capture lessons learned or train best practices for team activities
- Evolution of skills and associated training needs over project life cycle not recognized

21. Inadequate Project Closeout:

- Lack of closeout plan and checklist
- Commissioning requirements not comprehensively addressed
- Financial closeout process and requirements not agreed to

22. Lessons Not Learned:

- Prior project post-mortems not reviewed
- Lessons learned and best practices encountered during project execution not captured or communicated
- Inadequate attention to conducting a project post-mortem

About the Author



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Bob Prieto is a senior executive effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering and construction industries. Currently Bob heads his own management consulting practice, Strategic Program Management LLC. He previously served as a senior vice president of Fluor, one of the largest engineering and construction companies in the world. He focuses on the development and delivery of large, complex projects worldwide and consults with owners across all market sectors in the development of programmatic delivery strategies. He is author of nine books including “Strategic Program Management”, “The Giga Factor: Program Management in the Engineering and Construction Industry”, “Application of Life Cycle Analysis in the Capital Assets Industry”, “Capital Efficiency: Pull All the Levers” and, most recently, “Theory of Management of Large Complex Projects” published by the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) as well as over 750 other papers and presentations.

Bob is an Independent Member of the Shareholder Committee of Mott MacDonald. He is a member of the ASCE Industry Leaders Council, National Academy of Construction, a Fellow of the Construction Management Association of America, Millennium Challenge Corporation Advisory Board and member of several university departmental and campus advisory boards. Bob served until 2006 as a U.S. presidential appointee to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Business Advisory Council (ABAC), working with U.S. and Asia-Pacific business leaders to shape the framework for trade and economic growth. He had previously served as both as Chairman of the Engineering and Construction Governors of the World Economic Forum and co-chair of the infrastructure task force formed after September 11th by the New York City Chamber of Commerce. Previously, he served as Chairman at Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) and a non-executive director of Cardno (ASX)

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