

# Your project failed, what now? <sup>1, 2</sup>

**Stephanie Bailey Brown, PMP**

## **ABSTRACT**

Projects fail for many reasons. This paper will focus on how to use project failure as valuable lessons learned to improve future project work. There are many lessons to obtain when a project fails. A critical step is to review the time spent planning the project work. Once the planning review is complete, collect and document the lessons, focus on improving communication and learn from your mistakes. This work will be useful to course correct future projects.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Project Management Institute (PMI) projects that employers will need 88 million individuals in project management-oriented roles by 2027, leading to an estimated 2.2 million new project management jobs (Harris, 2021). The economy is becoming more project oriented, with industries such as manufacturing, construction, and finance are now relying on project management principles to keep processes on track and ensure stakeholders work together cohesively.

Additionally, disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an even greater and more immediate need for the skill set of project managers to drive change and innovation in the organizations they serve. In other words, companies are investing in ways to manage change and depend on project managers to lead projects focused on change strategies. However, many of these projects fail. According to TeamStage, 70% of all projects fail, and 42% of companies don't understand the need or importance of project management (TeamStage, 2021). So why do projects fail? This paper will focus on several key reasons why projects fail, and successful tactics to assist with managing project failure.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the [9<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Maryland PM Symposium](#) in May 2022. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

<sup>2</sup> How to cite this paper: Brown, S. B. (2022). Your project failed, what now? presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Maryland Project Management Symposium, College Park, Maryland, USA in May 2022; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue VII, July.

## WHY PROJECTS FAIL

There are many potential causes of project failure. These could include a lack of or a poorly defined project charter, poor resource planning, unclear goals and objectives, lack of project visibility, communication gaps, scope creep and unrealistic expectations.

Projects can have high failure rates, and there is even some debate about projects and their value in the organization. Is it a needed function? Should it be outsourced? Our view is that projects hold the key to an organization's productive future and done poorly can lead to the failure of a business. Done well, projects can give a firm a significant competitive advantage (Discenza & Forman, 2007). The goal of project management is to produce a successful product or service. Often this goal is hindered by the errors of omission as well as commission by management, project managers, team members and others associated with the projects.

Projects most commonly fail because there is a lack of attention and efforts applied to seven performance factors:

**Focus on business value, not technical detail.** This involves establishing a clear link between the project and the organizations key strategic practices. The project plan needs to cover the planned delivery, the business change required and the means of benefits realization.

**Establish clear accountability for measured results.** There must be clear view of the interdependencies between the projects, the benefits, and the criteria against which success will be judged. It is necessary to establish a stable requirement baseline before any other work goes forward. Requirements may continue to creep. In all projects there will be some degree of "learning what the requirements really are" while building the project product.

**Have consistent processes for managing unambiguous checkpoints.** Successful large projects typically have software measurement programs for capturing productivity and quality historical data that can be used to compare it against similar projects to judge the validity of schedules, costs, quality, and other project related factors. The lack of effective quality centered mechanisms can be a major contributor to both cost and schedule overruns.

**Have a consistent methodology for planning and executing projects.** There should be a detailed plan developed before any release date of a project is announced. Inadequate planning is one of the major reasons why projects spin out of control.

**Include the customer at the beginning of the project and continually involve the customer as things change so that the required adjustments can be made together.** It has been observed that successful projects occur when end users (customers) and the project members work as teams in the same cubicle, although this is not always possible. Projects are less likely to fail if there are informed customers giving meaningful input during every phase of requirements elicitation,

product description and implementation. The customer needs to be asking, “How are the project results used over time and what do I get out of the results?”

**Manage and motivate people so that project efforts will experience a zone of optimal performance throughout its life.** This involves managing and retaining the most highly skilled and productive people. Knowledge is money. A project team made up of higher paid people with the right specialized skills is worth more per dollar than a group of lower cost people who need weeks or months of training before they can start to be productive.

**Provide the project team members the tools and techniques they need to produce consistently successful projects.** The project team must be skilled and experienced with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. If not, there must be access to expertise which can benefit those fulfilling the requisite roles (Discenza & Forman, 2007).

## HOW MUCH TO PLAN

Project planning is one of the most important responsibilities of a project manager. This process is vital because without a clear vision the team will not be able to properly execute tasks and reach the project goal. The most effective team cannot overcome a poor project plan, and projects started down the wrong path can lead to the most spectacular project failures (Thomas, et. Al, 2008).

“Plans are a cornerstone of any project; consequently, planning is a dominant activity within a project context.” (Blomquist, et. Al. 2010, p.11)

Planning is inherently important to project success, or one could argue project management would not exist. In summary, do not skip the planning phase of any project!

Surprisingly, little research has been done on how much planning should be done in projects. There are several studies that support how much time is spent on the project planning process. The key lies in how complex your project is, and how many stakeholders are involved. Is the project new? Newer projects will require more planning. How uncertain are the outcomes? Instead of worrying about the details and whether you’ve spent enough time planning, focus on proper project planning and the eight elements of effective project planning.

1. Stakeholder needs
2. Smart project objectives
3. Deliverable and deadlines
4. A detailed project schedule
5. Defined roles and responsibilities
6. The costs and budget
7. A communication plan
8. The systems and processes you will use

Most importantly, instead of worrying about how much time to spend on planning, focus on quality planning or streamlining the planning process (Darlington, 2013).

## **YOUR PROJECT FAILED - WHAT NOW?**

First, the project manager must determine if a project is off course and determine how or if a project can be saved, postponed, corrected, or abandoned. The best answer is to spend time planning the project properly, and use metrics, tools, and communication to inspect the project often for issues. As soon as you see the project failing, act quickly to mitigate the damage. If you cannot see the big picture, consider bringing in an RPM (recovery project manager). These consultants can offer a fresh perspective on the failing project.

Once you have determined the project failed, prepare your team to manage the consequences, then review all the project data. Figure out what specifically happened to cause the project to fail. Conduct lessons learned with every stakeholder on the project team. Determine what components of the project worked and can be salvaged for a future project.

Do not give up. Project failure is disappointing, but not the end. For every success, there is usually a necessary aspect of failure that accompanies it as well. Failure is familiar to many great leaders, who still succeeded. Examples include Nelson Mandela, George Washington Carver, Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, Steven Spielberg, and many other innovators. If failure is managed well; you can come back stronger and better. Always identify what you learned after a failed project. Nelson Mandela said I never lose. I either win or I learn. All project managers should adopt this mantra.

## **LESSONS LEARNED IDENTIFIED**

Capturing lessons learned should be an on-going effort throughout the life of the project. This mindset should be strongly encouraged by the project manager from day one. Whether we are using lessons learned to prepare for current projects or for identifying project management process improvements, we learn from project failures as well as project successes. By not learning from project failures, we are doomed to repeat similar situations. By not maximizing on project successes, we miss opportunities to implement good processes and practices to successfully complete existing and future work.

Learning occurs on every project. Lessons learned is the learning gained from the process of performing the project (Rowe, et. Al, 2006). We learn from our own project experiences as well as the experiences of others. Project managers, team members and leadership can all participate in the lessons learned sessions, review the lessons learned reports and make decisions on how to use the knowledge gained. Sharing lessons learned among project team members prevents an organization from repeating the same mistakes and allows them to take advantage of organizational best practices. Innovative approaches and good work practices can be shared with others. Implementing lessons learned can improve future projects and future stages of current projects.

There are several steps to the lessons learned process. They include identifying, document, analyze, store and retrieve.

Step 1 of the lessons learned process is to identify comments and recommendations that could be valuable for future projects. The two activities for identifying lessons learned are: prepare for lessons learned session and conduct lessons learned session. If possible, the project manager should not lead the lessons learned session. The facilitator should prepare in advance by using metrics gathered in a survey and summarizing for the lessons learned participants. The project survey will help the participants to be better prepared to respond during the lessons learned session and will also give them the opportunity to provide input if they are unable to attend. When conducting the lessons learned sessions the following questions should be asked by the facilitator:

- What went right
- What went wrong
- What needs to be improved

Step two of the lessons learned process is to document and share findings.

After lessons learned are captured, they should be reported to project stakeholders. Different types of reports can be produced based on the audience. The detailed lessons learned report consists of the data captured during the lessons learned session and any additional input from participants who were not able to attend. The facilitator should distribute the detailed lessons learned report to all participants and participants should be given time to respond to the accuracy of the report. After the report is finalized, the entire project team should receive a copy even if they did not participate in the lessons learned session. The final report should be stored with the other project documentation (Rowe, et. Al, 2006).

Step three of the lessons learned process is to analyze and organize the lessons learned for application of results. At level 1 analysis is more informal as the team decides what can be done with the lessons learned. Information is shared with other teams during organizational meetings. Project management process improvements or training needs are often identified because of lessons learned recommendations (Rowe, et. Al, 2006).

Step four of the lessons learned process is to store in a repository. At level 1, organizations do not have a dedicated lessons learned repository in place. Lessons learned documents are stored along with other project documents, normally on a shared drive or in some form of project library. There is no easy means of retrieving the lessons. Organizations often set up a lessons learned folder on the shared drive to make the lessons learned reports available to other project teams (Rowe, et. Al, 2006).

Step five of the lessons learned process is to retrieve for use on current projects. This is step is

rarely used at level 1. Although lessons learned reports are stored on a shared drive, without key word search capability, it is difficult to retrieve the appropriate lesson (Rowe, et. Al, 2006).

The final key step to ensure a successful lessons learned program is a commitment from senior level management. That commitment is visible through regular repository metrics review, action taken to implement best practices, and support to improve negative or re-occurring project trends. To keep the value of lessons learned in front of executives, it is critical to keep executive level reporting brief and concise (Rowe, et. Al, 2006).

## **SUMMARY**

Barack Obama said you cannot let your failures define you. You must let your failures teach you. Assessing and recovering a failing project can be among the most challenging work for a project manager to perform for an organization.

The best project managers are not the ones who succeed the most, but the ones who are best at handling failure (Patel, 2017). The payoff can be huge, since a project brought out of failure can provide significant value to any organization. The seven factors outlined in this paper are critical for assessing a failing project's performance and planning corrective action to make the project successful. All seven factors are needed for success. When one factor turns negative and is not corrected disaster is unavoidable (Discenza & Forman, 2007).

Winston Churchill was clear when he said to let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning. Even when we plan and plan again, projects can still fail. Therefore, we should learn from our mistakes by documenting what we learn. Lessons learned should be ongoing and completed for every project, whether the project fails or not. Capturing lessons learned should be a continuous effort throughout the life cycle of the project. Adopting a culture of capturing lessons learned should be supported by executive leadership and the culture of the organization. In summary, we cannot predict how projects will conclude and some projects will fail. As project managers we should plan, review, and finalize the plan with stakeholders, collect the lessons we learn and learn from our mistakes. Project failure can be good when we use the lessons learned to improve future project work. Project Managers will benefit from documenting lessons learned because failure teaches wisdom and growth.

## **REFERENCES**

Blomquist, T., Hällgren, M., Nilsson, A., & Söderholm, A. (2010). "Project-as-practice: In search of project management research that matters." *Project Management Journal*, 41(1), 5–16.

Darlington, N. (2013). Don't boil the ocean: Why too much project planning is a bad thing. <https://www.freshbooks.com/blog/time-project-planning>

Discenza, R. & Forman, J. B. (2007). Seven causes of project failure: how to recognize them and how to initiate project recovery. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2007—North America, Atlanta, GA. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.

Harris, K. (2021). Why organizations are turning to project management professionals to drive innovation and change. <https://pe.gatech.edu/blog/industry-trends/project-management-value>

TeamStage. (2021). 31 Pivotal Project Management Statistics for 2021. <https://teamstage.io/project-management-statistics/>

Thomas, M., Jacques, P. H., Adams, J. R., & Kihneman-Woote, J. (2008). “Developing an effective project: Planning and team building combined.” *Project Management Journal*, 39(4), 105–113.

Patel, A. (2017). How to deal with project failure. Paymo. <https://www.paymoapp.com/blog/how-to-deal-with-project-failure/>

Rowe, S. F. & Sikes, S. (2006). Lessons learned: taking it to the next level. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2006—North America, Seattle, WA. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.



## About the Author



### **Stephanie Bailey Brown**

Maryland, USA



**Stephanie Brown** is the Executive Vice President, Chief Performance Officer at So Others Might Eat (SOME) where she leads the Continuing Quality Improvement Department. Stephanie specializes in collecting information and transforming information to data to drive business decisions. Stephanie is an enthusiastic servant leader, who builds and leads high performing teams. Stephanie believes that learning is a continual process that should never end and laughing is truly the best medicine. Stephanie uses her project management skills to mentor young professionals, and volunteer for human service organizations. Stephanie is a Project Management Professional (PMP) and has earned advanced degrees in Social Work, Diversity and Inclusion and Project Management. She has over 25 years' experience with social service, healthcare, and non-profit agencies.

Stephanie can be contacted at [sbrown@some.org](mailto:sbrown@some.org)