Is your project failing?
Actionable steps to get back on track to succeed! [1, 2]

Frank Murphy

Abstract

Projects fail in both traditional disciplines and IT at an alarming rate. One consideration is knowing how we define success when we start the journey. More importantly, do the people doing the work know the goals? This presentation will go through steps to ensure you have a better chance of success by looking at ways to define and present plans, key results, and which ones we should care about, make things happen, and look at who is impacted.

We often talk about success, but it is easy to blame others when projects slide in scope, budget, and time. There are plenty of methodologies, but the goals won't be met if you don't use and emphasize a process. We should never limit ourselves to one approach. Agile, traditional methods, and hybrid all have potent tools. An overlooked essential technique is change management, which works.

Join me in looking at a program with multiple workstreams, stakeholders with different views and goals, and a floating budget. This journey will look at how you can approach the program systematically to at least hedge your bets towards success.

Introduction

The first question to answer is who is in charge of the project? If the Project Manager role is not clear, many challenges will arise.

Projects are failing across all industries. A statistic that should alarm project managers is the failure rate; 70% of all projects fail to deliver (31 Pivotal project management statistics for 2021, 2021). Although this percentage can be abstract and denial of our project being a victim is

---

[1] *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 14th UT Dallas PM Symposium in May 2022. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

[2] How to cite this paper: Murphy, F. (2022). Is your project failing? Actionable steps to get back on track to succeed!; presented at the 14th University of Texas at Dallas Project Management Symposium in Richardson, TX, USA in May 2022; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue XI, November.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

commonplace, the fact that 9.9% of every project dollar is wasted should get your attention. Here are some more detailed statistics. 37% of the failures are due to unclear project goals, and 75% of IT respondents think their project is doomed to failure. Budget overruns are cited by 55% of project managers as a reason for project failure, but the exciting part is what causes success, or at least increases the probability of success. One aspect is sponsors. Sponsors that are engaged have 40% more successful projects. Another perspective is projected plans from organizations with project management practices meet goals at 89% versus 34% with no plan.

What does project failure mean? How would you define the failure or success of your particular project? It seems simple enough – but is failure a function of just being late? As 55% of project managers mentioned as a cause, is it a case of being over budget? Interestingly, this statistic is how much budget overrun is not disclosed. Is failure a case of the objectives not being met as initially described? Each of these options can be true – or false. What does your primary stakeholder consider a failure? Were there performance indicators to ensure the project was tracked as it progressed and early warning signs were provided? How often do you report out?

What are some statistics about failure? Some statistics: 50% of PMs state they do not meet stated deliverables; one in six IT projects has a 200% cost overrun, less than 1/3 of projects completed successfully in 2013; 17% of large IT projects fail to the extent that they threaten organization existence; and 70% of surveyed organizations suffered at least one project failure in the past 12 months (Project failure rates, facts, and causes, 2022)

I've given you a laundry list of questions and statistics, but only to get the conversation going. How would you discover if the correct answer for your project is suitable or that you should be making adjustments if you hope to be successful?

The objective is to show a framework that can be duplicated, is scalable, and works. The framework we will cover involves four major components. These components are stakeholders, goals; change; and design thinking. Each part may sound familiar, but a different perspective may give additional tools and techniques to get a project back on track or allow planning in another way to make your next project more efficient and with more favorable results. Here are some working definitions and perspectives so we can align on these components.

Stakeholders

As Project Managers, we need to define and assess the primary stakeholders for a particular project. A stakeholder can have differing definitions, so here is how I'll describe them for my talk. The critical component is defining who the defining decision-maker is – we care about all the stakeholders, but we care the most about this entity. Stakeholder goals must be obvious and well defined on what the 'must have's are, in their own words. Gold plating of the scope is genuine, scope creep lives, and we must definitively know mandatory requirements. The required

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

definition should include whether there is a will to pay more, accept less in other areas, or delay deadlines to meet the need. If any of these items are not true, assess what is being called mandatory in a different light. The goals as defined are essential, but the stakeholder has shown they are willing to let items go when times get tough.

An essential component of defining these goals is realizing they have a high potential to change. PMI has a great page that describes a process of eliciting requirements and some ways to accomplish that specific aspect (Address changing stakeholder needs, 2022). These include iteration demos, interviews, and modeling from the software development perspective. Requirements gathering can also occur further in the process than in a construction project, where details are needed early to build a plan. Some other aspect of remaining aware of is why requirements may change. It may not be just stakeholder desires. Some variables include regulatory environments, technology changes, and legislative changes.

A conversation about stakeholders is not complete without talking about analysis. A classic study would consider the power, legitimacy, and urgency of issues to determine how much attention should be afforded to any particular stakeholder (Eskerod et al., 2015). This perspective needs to expand also to consider those who may be impacted by the objectives and realize the analysis is good for just a point in time. As projects progress, stakeholder needs and influence can potentially change, and you need to assess now what is required. Other tasks may be more critical, and decisions will reflect the new reality.

A copper mine in Minnesota had its efforts documented to achieve a better working strategy (BSR, 2012).   Their goal was to have an early engagement of a diverse group of stakeholders to develop engagement with traditional stakeholders and how they would engage with the community to manage expectations they were going to mine in an environmentally responsible manner. The first step of the engagement plan was to interview groups early, including community leaders and environmental groups. Next, they used that information to inform the company's sustainability strategy. The final aspect was identifying partnerships for workforce training and local material sourcing. These components helped alleviate conflict by addressing concerns early in the process. Although it may have been worked in the initial phases, the stakeholder component was expanded to look at the overall long-term goals and how to manage expectations best and produce sustainable results.

BSR further defines this strategy component as *The Four Cs' of Integrated Strategy* (2012). The strategic goal is to look at components encompassing views of the customer, competitors, corporations, and civil society. The customer perspective looks at the traditional picture of meeting needs. It expands by looking at expectations, sustainability expected by the customer, and how customers may wish to be part of the solution. The competitive aspect considers advantages, differentiated value, and sustainability authenticity. The corporate variable uses core strengths and incentive structure alignment. The final component acknowledges the impact

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

of civil society, including aspects of regulation, sustainability sustainment, and exceeding compliance guardrails. This view demonstrates a mindset of looking to thrive at project completion and having a sustainable solution developed that meets the needs of various stakeholders that are not traditionally considered.

Goals

Define overall goals simply in an executive summary for easy reference, and use that document whenever your report on the progress of your project. This step will reference what everyone is anticipating when the project is completed. You must understand what is needed to be considered a successful project and document any assumptions that impact these references. One example is timing and if the project must be completed by a certain date. Any specific criteria should also have the level of acceptable variations.

If the project involves software, there need to be clear acceptance criteria and whether the software will be deployed in a production environment. An application should include required performance characteristics. A data-driven application should have Service Level Objectives, uptime requirements, and required volume criteria. A level of scalability must happen to deliver data that consists of 10,000 records with 50 variable attributes versus a project of 10,000,000 records with 500 details.

Construction projects should have any inspections that are required. These inspections may include in-process inspections, where work must be accepted before proceeding. One example is an inspection of wall construction before sheetrock can be installed.

The goals section also needs a detailed schedule that has defining moments. Why are the specific dates important? For example, working on a building for a sporting event would be significant if the installation is completed after the deadline. The project would be considered a failure since it wouldn't be helpful for the intended purpose.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

SAFE diagram of the iterative process (Scaled Agile Framework, 2021).
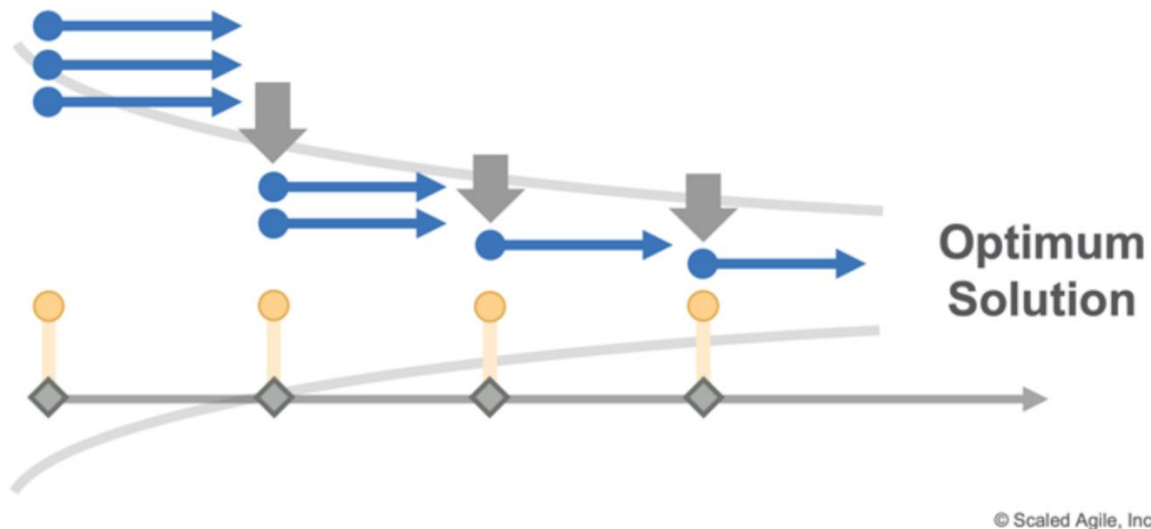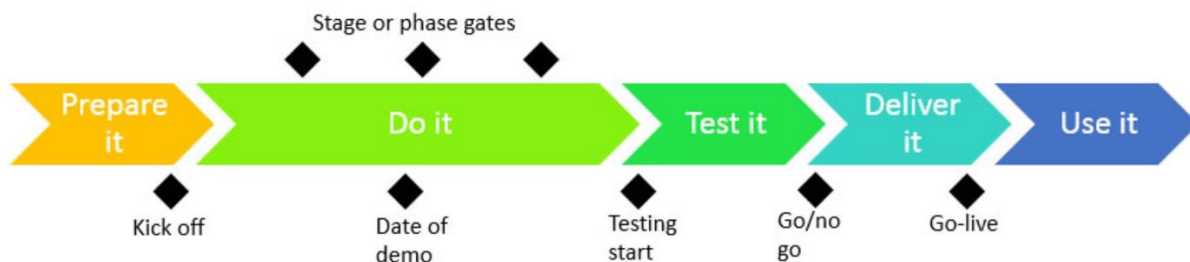

© Scaled Agile, Inc.

Figure 3. PI milestones guide system developers to the optimum solution

Stakeholdermap.com has this view

Budget goals also need options to be considered during planning. We tend to think of management reserve as a safety net, but there may be other considerations that become less effective as the project progresses. Once work is planned, you generally do not get the absolute monetary value of canceled work returned if that segment is canceled. In software development, the cancellation value depends on what dependency connects to other work. Once the plan is started, it is generally expensive to change direction in construction.

An example would be adding an office. At first glance, you are simply adding more walls to an interior space, so that the cost would be the additional wall construction. The air conditioning and heating components need to be adjusted for airflow, electricity will be considered, and fire sprinklers will need a new design. A final aspect is getting the new strategy approved through the permitting process.

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

Budget goals can become more refined as planning continues evolving; rough order of magnitude estimates can be used to screen a project (accuracy of +/- 50%); and refinements would continue until the budget is developed with an accuracy of -10% to +25% (Rosekie, 2019).

One way to define goals is performance-based versus prescriptive-based terms. If you can specify the expected values, that is an excellent methodology to describe the outcome. I will tell you what I need versus what steps to take to get there in contract terms. Software development can be defined in terms of business expectations. This idea aligns with what Product Managers produce as part of their roadmaps (Altexsoft, 2020). Roadmaps can document strategic goals, with potential views showing themes, features, or technology.

Change

Change management is always a part of projects in some fashion. There are various approaches, including the Project Management Institute, American Society for Quality, and Prosci. Each method is another tool that can be used to ensure project success.

The Project Management Institute method is outlined in the changing life cycle framework. This framework consists of formulating a change; planning the change, including the approach, implementing the change; managing the transition; and sustaining the change (Project Management Institute, 2013). The American Society for Quality framework is similar, but it explicitly calls out the need for metrics, changes implementation in stages, and understanding of any resistance. The resistance aspect also covers various settings, such as current, transition, and improved, with appropriate steps for each portion (ASQ, 2022). Prosci is another method that is specifically focused on individuals (Prosci, 2022). As an indicator of the value that can be leveraged by change management, Prosci cites some statistics. Excellent change management techniques allow: 6x more likely to achieve project objectives; 5x more likely to stay on schedule; and 2x more likely to stay on budget.

It is essential to use some version of managing change to leverage your chances of success. A factor to consider is whether change is part of your goal definition. Have you considered the resource requirements to install, train, and be effective if you implement new technology and need documentation? If not, how will you be supported? Another important aspect is whether the stakeholders agree with your methodology. Each change management method provides a framework, and different ones work better in various projects.

Design thinking

Design thinking is the last component to consider in this framework. Think of this perspective as planning with the end in mind and encompassing an entirely new ecosystem. This component will take time will design and develop but can produce significant results.

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

One definition of design thinking is "an interactive process in which you seek to understand your users, challenge assumptions, redefine problems, and create innovative solutions you can prototype and test: (Dam, R, and Siang, T, 2021). Some uses include a need to improve products and processes and experiment to discover new ways to meet customer expectations. Alternative solutions can be explored, and the best solution can evolve from this style of an iterative approach. If we think about software development, where you have a minimum viable product and then iterate, we realize this process is already used extensively. The beauty of looking at the framework is understanding the evolution of solutions and not stopping when the first acceptable method is found.

But why does design thinking work? Jeanne Liedtka described the process in a 2018 article. The framework allows you to get around human bias (status quo) or accept that it is the way we have always done things. Asking more interesting questions and using user criteria are essential, along with diverse views. But more importantly, it is exploring options to solve challenging problems by looking at items from the customer's perspective. Different ideas are accepted or rejected for potential solutions if you understand their perspective. The result is assumptions are challenged, and better solutions are attempted. "Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success" Tim Brown, Executive Chair of Ideo.

Design thinking as an adopted method is only about 15 years old. The origin is to answer what designers had to offer to the modern world. "Wicked problems" is a term that was used to define something "complex, open-ended, and ambiguous" (History, 2018). That term can describe many projects in their beginning planning stages: planning stages and ambiguous.
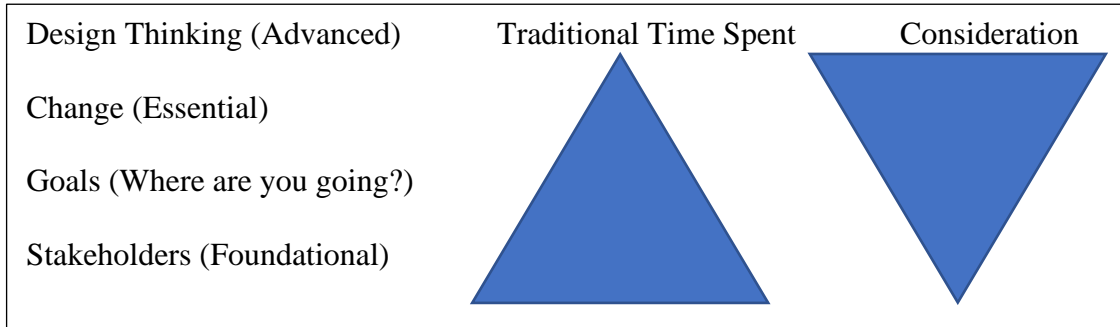
Application

With the framework defined, how can we use these tools to assess and work towards a better chance of success for a project?

My goal is to use a fictional representation of a marketing project to encompass aspects of software development and an actual-world marketing application to define steps to take for success. Each element of the project steps can be expanded, but in a world of competing resources, you have to decide where to use your planning time best effectively and efficiently.

> *This diagram represents a different snapshot of time and effort within this framework. Typically, we would spend significant time with stakeholders and less time on goal development and change management if we had time to plan. I suggest we spend more time on design thinking aspects to work on the ecosystem on complex projects that we need to scale.   We would still spend significant time with traditional stakeholders. Still,*

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

we would consider more of the customer perspective and what needs to be accomplished for the best results in a sustainable manner.

Marketing Project (fictional traditional style goal):

Develop a campaign executed by email and reaches 1 million customers. Success will be measured by 17 campaign metrics (Campaign Monitor, 2021)

Open Rate	Click-through rate
Conversion rate	Bounce rate
Number of unsubscribes	List growth rate
Spam complaints	Forwarding rate/email sharing
Engagement over time	Overall ROI
Email sharing rate	Mobile open rate
Mobile click rate	Domain open rate
Domain click rate	Revenue per email
Revenue per subscriber	

If we consider using the identified framework of 4 components, the summary includes stakeholders and goals but no recognized change management or design thinking aspects.

Change management in this example could include:

How are the marketers executing this campaign? (Is 1 million customers a significant amount?)

How does it compare to previous campaign volumes?
How will these metrics be managed? Are they automated? Are they available on a Dashboard?

Design thinking principles in this example could include defining the actual goals of the campaign that need to be achieved to declare it victorious. The goal is not to simply send emails, but we

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

are looking for an action to be taken by the customer, whether it is a purchase, providing information, or being persuaded to vote.

How could we write a performance-based goal for a marketing campaign?

Develop a marketing campaign, using the best channels, that will reach a prospective audience of 1 million customers within one week to provide information on a new product and entice the customer to 1) provide contact information; 2) consent to future campaigns with the same product; 3) close the sale.

Connections needed:

- Database with customer information to develop a required audience
- Channel that is appropriate for customer segment (maybe generational differences on the preferred medium, but dependent on the product – i.e., mail vs. text)
- Software and services needed to complete the transaction of product sale
    - Potentials include customer representative, credit card, bank deposit information, and other online methods.
    - Average shopping cart abandonment is 70% (HostGator, 2020) - improve upon this number.
    - Metrics used and industry standards for planning purposes

Define the expected conversion rate

After the structure for the marketing campaign is developed, determine what change management is needed to assess changes for marketers, IT support, and business partners. The goal is to ensure the ecosystem for this campaign is considered and improved for the next campaign.

Develop automated metrics for accurate time assessment of success and see if there are other variables impacting the campaign in execution.

Conclusion

This presentation was developed to provide another perspective on approaching projects in a way that is sustainable, scalable, and has the potential to achieve scalable results. Since projects are one-time endeavors, all planning must occur with the knowledge that resources are finite, and not all efforts respond well to the same approach. For complex projects that involve multiple business lines, and varied stakeholders, this approach can provide structure for getting started. More importantly, it provides additional tools for Project Managers to consider in executing

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

challenging projects. All projects won't require design thinking and planning for months, but considering the process and stakeholders can yield benefits.

If we consider why projects fail, 37% are due to unclear goals. The marketing example defined goals in low planning for success without dictating how to execute. The example shows change specifically, involves multiple partners, and looks to the future. Change management can enhance project success by 6x more likely to achieve project objectives; 5x more likely, to stay on schedule; and 2c more likely to stay on budget. The final aspect is considering design thinking and the marketing ecosystem. This has the potential to get better solutions or consider more options for campaigns. Some things may not be possible with limited resources, but you would have identified a hindrance and can put that work in the backlog for future refinements.

References

15 Fascinating project management statistics. (2020, October 9). Hive.com.
    https://hive.com/blog/project-management-statistics/

31 Pivotal project management statistics for 2021. (2021, January 8). TeamStage.
    https://teamstage.io/project-management-statistics/

Address changing stakeholder needs. (2022). PMI.org. https://www.pmi.org/disciplined-agile/construction-goals/address-changing-stakeholder-needs

Altexsoft. (2020, March 5). *Product roadmap: Key features, types, building tips, and roadmap examples*. AltexSoft. https://www.altexsoft.com/blog/business/product-roadmap-key-features-common-types-and-roadmap-building-tips/

ASQ. (2022). *What is change management?* ASQ.com. https://asq.org/quality-resources/change-management

BSR. (2012, October 22). *Twin metals Minnesota: Using early stakeholder engagement to improve strategy*. https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/case-study-view/twin-metals-minnesota-using-early-stakeholder-engagement

Campaign Monitor. (2021, September 9). *17 email marketing metrics every marketer needs to know*. https://www.campaignmonitor.com/blog/email-marketing/17-email-marketing-metrics-every-email-marketer-needs-to-know/

Dam, R., & Siang, T. (2021). *What is design thinking and why is it so popular?* The Interaction Design Foundation. https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular

PM World Journal *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

Eskerod, P., Human, M., & Savage, G. (2015). *Project stakeholder management*. Project Management Journal. https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/project-stakeholder-management-9812

History. (2018, October 24). IDEO.com. https://designthinking.ideo.com/history

HostGator. (2020, November 20). *Top 10 online payment methods for ecommerce sites*. https://www.hostgator.com/blog/online-payment-methods-ecommerce/

Liedtka, J. (2018, September). *Why design thinking works*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2018/09/why-design-thinking-works

Project failure rates, facts and causes. (2022). SandboxModel. https://www.sandboxmodel.com/content/project-failure-rates-facts-and-causes

Project Management Institute. (2013). *Managing change in organizations: A practice guide*.

Prosci. (2022). *Change management*. Prosci.com. https://www.prosci.com/change-management

Rosekie, P. (2019, March 22). *The rough order of magnitude estimate*. Project Engineer. https://www.projectengineer.net/the-rough-order-of-magnitude-estimate/

Scaled Agile Framework. (2021, May 25). *Milestones*. https://www.scaledagileframework.com/milestones/

Stakeholdermap. (2021, June 9). *What are project milestones? Meaning and definition*. Stakeholdermap.com. https://www.stakeholdermap.com/project-management/project-milestones.html

PM World Journal (ISSN: 2330-4480)
Vol. XI, Issue XI – November 2022
www.pmworldjournal.com

Is your project failing?
by Frank Murphy
Second Edition

About the Author

Frank Murphy

Texas, USA

Frank Murphy retired as a CMSgt after 30 years in the USAF. His career involved travel to the seven continents, numerous countries, and involvement with most military operations that needed airlift. Frank completed a DBA in Management, focusing on remote working, but his passion remains with making projects happen. He currently teaches project management and manages a program implementing marketing technology for a Fortune 100. Frank lives in the Hill Country near San Antonio and loves the area. He can be contacted at dbafrank@outlook.com