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Paul Goldberg, MPH, PMP

Paul Goldberg & Associates, LLC

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By Paul Goldberg, MPH, PMP
Paul Goldberg & Associates, LLC

According to project management literature, a startling percent of projects fail; we're talking in the 50%-60% range!

Whether developing a new product or service, creating a strategic business plan, implementing a system, or improving a business process, projects just sometimes go bad. Often they aren't completed or if they are, they are late, over budget or short of the original scope. This is more than frustrating; it is expensive in terms of time, resources, missed opportunities and morale.

After years of managing complex projects, I have found there are many ways projects can get off track. Here are some of the common ones I watch for:

- The **sponsor** is not committed or involved. Or, worse, there is no executive level sponsor.
- The project is **not aligned** with the organizational vision, mission and goals.
- The **scope** is not managed and is either incomplete or "creeps" into unintended areas.
- There is no **work plan**, or the plan is incomplete or inaccurate.
- **Input** to what is required is vague, or **end-users** were not involved in developing requirements.
- Insufficient **resources** in terms of staff and/or funds are made available.
- There are no **project management** processes or tools.
- There is insufficient **communication** before and during the project.

Whether your world does or does not include formally trained project managers (yes, project manage-ment has become a fairly sophisticated discipline!), there are some simple steps you can take to keep your project from going bad:

Assign Appropriate Resources: Each project needs an Executive Sponsor to champion and guide it and a Project Manager to lead it on a daily basis. The Project Manager needs to be freed up to dedicate time for this work; for larger projects, this may require a half or full time commitment. Often, outside help needs to be brought in to play this role. The Project Team should include stakeholders from throughout the organization and include, in particular, those who are part of any process that is being created or changed. Be sure not to overwhelm team members who already have full time jobs. Reassignment of responsibilities may be necessary if a project is going to use more than 10% of a team member's time.

Write a Charter and Scope: These documents (I sometimes like to consolidate them to one document) identify the Executive Sponsor, Project Manager and the Project Team, and they describe the project objectives, desired outcomes, deliverables, key milestones, a high level timeline and resource needs. These documents are used to authorize the project and attain agreement to and support of the project. They don't have to be incredibly detailed, but they do need sufficient information to guide the direction of the project.

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>
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Develop Detailed Require-ments: This document provides detailed information on what the project is to deliver. It should be a collaborative effort to develop requirements and include extensive input from end-users.

Maintain a Work Plan: Projects can get complex fairly quickly. To keep activities from falling through the cracks, it is essential to keep track of specific tasks, dependencies, account-abilities, and start and end dates.

COMMUNICATE!! Make sure the entire organization knows what is being worked on, why, by whom and progress being made. Many staff are touched by these efforts, so make sure they know what is going on and that the work has Executive support.

Monitor and Adjust: Set up measurable milestones to check progress along the way. Review these regularly to see if the project is on target or if it is starting to go sideways.

If you find your project is off target, you must diagnose the problem and take action. It is important to identify the root cause of the problem. Some questions to consider are:

- Are you sticking to the project scope?
- Is there sufficient Executive Sponsor support, involvement and communication?
- Do team members understand their responsibilities?
- Are risks being identified and addressed?
- Are resources sufficient, and are they being used efficiently?

Once the problem is identified, action often comes in one of the following forms:

1. Change the project timeline. More time may be required to get things done. Or, in some cases, timelines can be reduced to create a sense of urgency and force efficiency (be careful, this can be tricky!).

2. Adjust the project resources. Consider not only the amount of resources, but whether they are the right resources. You may need to add funds to the budget, or staff to complete work on time. Team members may need coaching to increase their efficiency. Or, some may need to be replaced if they are not successful in completing their assignments.

3. Modify the project scope. It may be necessary to reduce the amount of what will be completed. (Be cautious, however, of saying things are going to be moved to a newly identified "phase 2," because I have found that, if not planned from the start, "phase 2" often doesn't happen.) You also need to check for "scope creep" where new requirements have been added along the way. These may need to be taken out, or requirements re-prioritized.

Any of these actions can have a significant impact on the project's overall success. Such changes require good communication and buy-in from key stakeholders.

Even with perfect planning from the start, all projects are at risk of going bad. The key is to continuously monitor progress and be flexible enough to make adjustments along the way.

Paul Goldberg & Associates, LLC. focuses on business consulting, project management and project management training and coaching. For information, go to www.pgoldbergconsulting.com. Paul can be reached at 206.372.5158 or by email at paulg@pgoldbergconsulting.com.

Washington Healthcare News

631 8th Avenue
Kirkland, WA 98033

David Peel, Editor
Elizabeth Peel, Production & Distribution

For Advertising and Inquiries:
Phone: 425-577-1334
Fax: 425-242-0452
E-mail: info@wahcnews.com

Visit us on the web at:
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