Top 10 Reasons Why Projects Fail

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Introduction

As a project management consultant at [JPStewart Associates](http://www.projmanage.com/), I have discovered that many projects fail outright. And further, that many of them fail for the same reasons. So I have compiled a Top Ten list of Reasons Why Projects Fail, largely from my own experience.  I’ve also tried to share some ideas about how each of these problems can be overcome.

Reason #1 – Scope Creep

Scope is everything that you are going to do and conversely, not going to do. So once you’ve figured out exactly what the project work is, usually via a Work Breakdown Structure, you need to freeze it and zealously guard against unplanned changes to it. So planned changes via a change control board are ok, since then the PM can issue a new schedule, risk and budget plan as needed. Otherwise, you will surely miss your target and make both the management and customer unhappy.

Reason #2 – Overallocated Resources

Often there are too few resources working on too many projects at the same time. In conjunction with that, managers don’t seem to have a grip on what their resources are doing all the time.  Team members are left to figure out for themselves what projects they should be working on and when. Better is for managers to meet weekly to discuss resource usage perhaps using a spreadsheet to track.

Reason #3 – Poor Communications

Many people on a project will know the project manageronly through his or her communications. And they will know him by how his voice comes across over the phone or especially by how well-written his emails are. If the project manager is not a clear unambiguous communicator, chaos and confusion will ensue.

Reason #4 –Bad Stakeholder Management

Stakeholders have a vested interest in the project for the good or sometimes to the detriment of the project. It is the project manager’s job not only to identify all stakeholders, but know how to manage and communicate with them in a timely fashion.  A communication management plan helps here.

Reason #5 – Unreliable Estimates

Estimates are very often just guesstimates by team members who are trying to calculate duration of tasks based on how long it took them last time. This may turn out to be totally accurate or may be completely wrong.  And if wrong, leads to a flawed schedule and increased risk. Historical records kept between projects helps solve this.

Reason #6 – No Risk Management

Every project is unique and hence, has uncertainty. When we try to qualify and quantify that uncertainty, we call it risk. It is incumbent upon the project manager to proactively anticipate things that might go wrong. Once he has identified risks, then he and the team can decide on how to respond to (e.g., mitigate, avoid) those specific risks should they occur.

Reason #7 – Unsupported Project Culture

I was once asked to consult for a company and discovered that a complex project was being handled by an untrained secretary using 20 Excel spreadsheets. In this case, management clearly did not fully understand what it took to manage a project either in tools or using trained personnel. This is not easily solvable because it requires education of management and a cultural shift.

Reason #8 – The Accidental Project Manager

This is similar to but not exactly the same as the unsupported project culture.  In this instance, what typically happens is that a technical person (software developer, chemist, etc.) succeeds at the job. Based on that, gets promoted to project manager and is asked to manage the types of projects they just came from. The problem is they often don’t get training in project management and may well lack the social skills the job calls for. And so they flounder and often fail despite previous successes.

Reason #9 – Lack of Team Planning Sessions

There is no more effective way to kick off a meeting than to have the entire team come together for a planning session. This enables everyone to not only work together on project artifacts (schedule, WBS) but also to bond as a team and buy into the project.

Reason #10 – Monitoring and Controlling

Many project managers will create a schedule and never (or rarely) update it. Or if they do, they’ll just fill in percent done, which is an arbitrary number often picked out of the air by the team member. Better if they record actuals such as date started, work accomplished and estimate of remaining work.