



Fixing Problem Projects

11 Tips for Immediate, Positive and Sustained Results

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We have all been there. “There” meaning having been on a project that despite good intentions has “gone south.” There are several truisms about behaviors on these projects.

What are those behaviors? Excessive e-mails; a CYA mentality; everyone focused exclusively on playing not-to-lose, or risk avoidance; game playing and posturing; very reactive/crisis mode; complete distrust; unresolved claims; job stalled or stopped; and, a high level of personal stress.

The other truism is that barring a change in key personnel, things rarely get better and will continue to devolve. Oh, and one more thing. According to our surveys, workshops and seminars, we found a minimum of 25% of construction projects in the U.S. are problem projects.

What can you do apart from “carrying on” or turning it over to the attorneys? Consider the following 11 ideas:

1. Acknowledge the team, or better yet, have them address the question themselves about why is it that good people can start projects with good intentions and the project can still turn out poorly? This takes defensiveness “off the table.”

2. Set aside all existing contractual disputes and potential claims. Put them in a *lock box*, as our client, Brian Cahill, Regional VP of Balfour Beatty, calls it, and either leave it alone or let senior management deal with it for the time being.

3. Request that the team consider a communication protocol going forward that calls for “no e-mails or letters except to confirm or memorialize a verbal conversation.” If you’re just communicating information/data, fine. But if the communication involves any sort of judgment, assessment, evaluation (let alone rejection), you will call your partner first.

4. No surprises. A corollary to the above is *no surprises*—especially by e-mail. Also, *no absolute No’s*. Remind them that there is always more than one way to interpret Specs, engineer a solution, or evaluate contract compliance.

5. Have the team “reset” their relationships and intentions. But first, give them four choices:

- A. Continue to argue about who’s right or wrong and about why the job is screwed up.
- B. Do nothing and let the status quo prevail. (If you ever want a project team to agree on something, ask them what the consequences are of continuing to disagree).
- C. Fix (or attempt to fix) today’s problems and issues. You might reference Peter Drucker’s quote, “Results are obtained by exploiting opportunities, not solving problems.”
- D. Reset and create a common set of compelling Project Goals from this day forward that will equate to an extraordinary success and would require nothing less than what we term “World Class” teamwork. In other words, shifting the ‘game’ from playing not to lose to playing to win, as a team. We have yet to see a problem project team not embrace this Choice D.

6. Engage the team in establishing those measurable team goals. A common goal (given the current circumstances) might be completing the job two months late. Here’s a useful tip: Have the team focus on what the client/end user thinks is really, really important today. On the Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital Rehab Project in Monterey, the team agreed to get the Operating Rooms up and running three months early with the understanding that the rest of the job would be four months late.

7. Quickly get the team in action toward the Project Goals with collaborative processes backed up by personal commitments to action. That’s right—names, dates and specific deliverables. Stop any reference to what happened in the past.

8. Having done the above, ask the team (in small groups) how they will deal with individuals who do not work toward the team goals, are complainers, or do not follow through on the commitments they’ve just made. Guess what? They are tough on one another! As one team member said, we will not let one of our partners fail. This creates a culture of what I term *active mutual support*. And, yes, it may result in a partner being asked to leave the team.

9. Create a conflict resolution ladder that expedites issue resolution. Emphasize to them that even with the ‘reset’ there will still be conflicts, issues and differences of opinion.

10. Mandate a review activity within 30 to (a maximum of) 60 days. In our experience, a team will know in less than 2-3 weeks if the ‘reset’ is working. Consider an interim survey.

11. Make it very clear to senior management that this process will need to be one of their top 2-3 priorities for the next 30 days and, without their commitment, the team and project is ‘dead in the water.’

Does the above work? The worse the project at the outset, the easier it is to reset. Why? As one contractor told me A ‘business-as-usual’ job is painful but tolerable but a truly ‘combative’ job is utter misery for everyone.

If executed well by the facilitator, and with senior management commitment, active workshop presence and scheduled review sessions, we experience a 90%+ success rate.



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