How to Save a Failing Project: Chaos to Control
By Authors Ralph R. Young, Steven M. Brady, & Dennis C. Nagle, Jr.
(A book review by R. Max Wideman)

Introduction

Sooner or later, every project manager is faced with a "failing project" – and even if they aren't, they may well go through that phase when they think they are. So this book should be pretty popular. As authors Ralph, Steven and Dennis state in their Preface to the book:
> "Poor project results are all too common. We often hear about projects that are canceled, go over budget, are completed late, or deliver less functionality than promised. Customers are dissatisfied, users are disappointed, and project staff are frustrated and overworked. Program and project managers may even lose their jobs."[1]

Normally, we might observe: "and so they should". But on closer inspection we see that all three authors have extensive backgrounds in the information technology (IT) and systems sectors where, it seems, anything goes. Hence, we conclude that this book is specifically written for those working in the IT sector and who need guidance accordingly to achieve a successful project.[2]

In the past we have argued that too many authors glibly talk about project success and failure without even mentioning what they mean by either. Not in this book. Right up front in their Introduction on page 1 the authors advisedly state that: [3]
> "A successful project can be defined as one that is completed within a set budget and schedule and that meets identified goals and objectives. But if project success can be defined in one sentence, why do so many projects fail?"

The authors then answer their own rhetorical question by listing the following eight items:[4]
- Unachievable objectives
- Unreasonable expectations
- Inadequate planning
- Unclear requirements and ineffective requirements practices
- Ineffective communication
- Insufficient resources (often resulting from poor estimation of the work required to conduct the project)
- Ineffective project tracking capabilities
- Poor quality and insufficient quality control

That seems to pretty well cover the map, but this is only the beginning because in Chapter 1 the authors offer a further list of ten items:[5]
- Poorly defined requirements
- Scope creep
- Stakeholders have different expectations
- Stakeholders have unrealistic expectations
- There is no real need or demand for the product
- There is a lack of user involvement in the project
- Change management is lacking or ineffective

- Poor quality control
- Problems are caught too late
- There is no project champion

Given the foregoing, the authors then set about providing a systematic approach to tackling the majority of each of these challenges.

Book Structure

Aside from the *Introduction* and *Final Thoughts*, this book is essentially arranged in three parts representing the major phases of Planning and Execution in the typical project life span. Each chapter concludes with a summary titled "In Brief" and "Suggested Reading and Resources" plus any chapter (end) "Notes".

The book's contents are as follows:
> *Foreword*
> *Preface*
> *Acknowledgements*

Introduction
Part I Project Awareness
> 1. Why Projects Fail
> 2. Is your Project Out of Control

Part II Project Planning: How to Recover a Failing Project
> 3. Analyzing Your Project
> 4. Why Create a Plan
> 5. Creating the Plan
> 6. Building a Team
> 7. Identifying the Products
> 8. Identifying the Work
> 9. Establishing the Schedule

Part III Project Execution: How to Minimize the Risk of Future Failure
> 10. Executing the Plan
> 11. Managing External and Internal Expectations
> 12. Managing Scope
> 13. Managing Quality
> 14. Optimizing the Plan

Final Thoughts – A Recommended Approach for Project Success
Acronyms
Glossary
References

As can be seen from these contents, the number of chapters in *Part II Project Planning* is the largest, suggesting therefore that planning is the most important part of any project. And so it should be. If you don't know how to get to where you are going, the chances of arriving are slim indeed. In fact, the presumption throughout the book is that your project is already failing, which is consistent with the book's title.

What we liked

All of the chapters are quite brief and very much to the point. They provide clear descriptions of the problems and the steps to take to fix them, or avoid them in the first place. These are easy to follow through the use of extensive bullet-form entries.

So, having established all the reasons why projects fail, the question is: How do you know your project is out of control? Good question. In the *Introduction*, the authors identify these telltale symptoms:[6]
*   Missed milestones and deliverables
*   Differing opinions of the project's goals and objectives
*   Exceeded budgets
*   Missed schedules
*   Dependence on heroes
*   Customer dissatisfaction and disapproval
*   Frustrated staff, and
*   Concerns voiced by various and many stakeholders.

While this list may not be comprehensive, at least it gives you a good idea of what to look for. In our own experience we have had to extricate projects that have effectively come to a complete standstill – at which point, executive management finally took notice.

But as if that is not enough, the authors also point to *Other Subtle Signs of Trouble*:[7]
*   Requests from customers to make changes to requirements
*   Staff attrition
*   Tension during meetings
*   Surprises
*   Lack of trust
*   Lack of honest feedback
*   Lack of management support
*   Consistently operating in 'crisis mode'
*   Finger-pointing
*   Defects in delivered work products
*   Frequent rework
*   Declaring incomplete work products 'done'
*   Poor assumptions
*   Project risks aren't mitigated
*   Ineffective meetings
*   Delayed decisions
*   Counterproductive responses to bad news

Sound familiar? Each of these is described in greater details.

We rather liked Chapter 3, *Analyzing Your Project*. As the authors state:[8]

> "Planning should be based on the business objectives that must be met and the functional goals of the completed project. If project teams want to succeed, they must focus on project planning, then on process and procedure development. PMs often believe that such effort is unnecessary, but in our experience, the failure to develop (or adapt from others' experience and existing documents) processes, procedures, and checklists is a root cause of project problems."
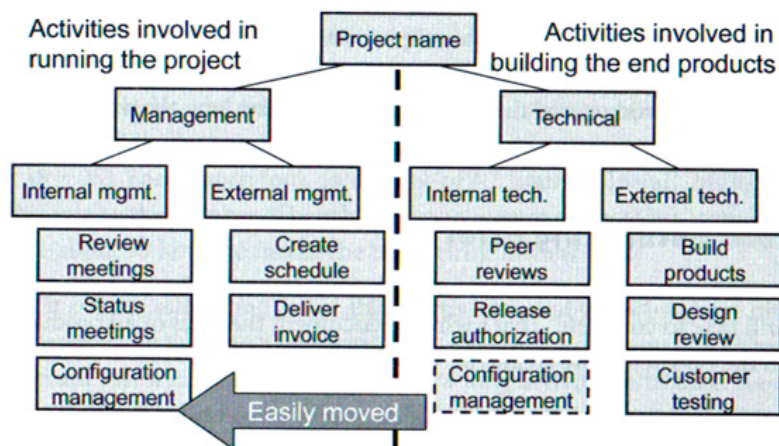
While later they observe about *The Plan Components*:[9]
> "As we worked with the project's stakeholders, it became clear that many thought that a Microsoft Project schedule equaled or provided a project plan. ***This is a common misconception***. We realized that we needed to educate the team about what a plan contains, each component's purpose, and how long a good plan would take to develop." [Emphasis added.]

The authors then go on to describe seven key components of a good plan. Of these, we were gratified to see that they list *Product Breakdown Structure* (PBS) and *Work Breakdown Structure* (WBS) as two separate items, and explain why they are distinctive and necessary. For example:[10]
> "If a project team does not identify all of the products it must build, it cannot account for all the associated work or accurately estimate the effort, time, and resources required to execute the project effectively. If the plan does not address all of the needed resources or allow enough time to get the job done, then the project automatically starts behind schedule and over budget."

How often have you seen "secondary" products like time-consuming team meetings and administration quietly ignored as though they didn't exist or were not a part of the project? And then you find the "management" time charges and costs coming home to roost later on, see Figure 1. Clearly, in planning and estimating it is not sufficient to consider only the technical delivery work.

Figure 1: Distinguishing between Management and Technical work[11]

Later the authors observe that:[12]
> "Even if you have prior experience, creating a plan can be very challenging. It's critical to obtain stakeholder acceptance during the planning process. Without stakeholder support, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to execute the plan . . . Developing a plan should be considered a mini-project with its own schedule and resources."

As might be expected, the chapters on Managing Scope and Quality are all about managing the technology. Here, the authors have pearls of wisdom of general application. For example:
- The average project invests three percent of total costs in the project-long requirements process, but data from NASA show much better results are achieved when eight to 14 percent of total project costs are invested in the requirements process.[13]
- Customers and users provide what we call *stated requirements*, the requirements given at the

beginning of a system- or software-development effort. Of course, the stated requirements are *never* the real requirements.[14]
- The earlier a defect or error is discovered, the easier it is to fix; the less impact it will have on other work products and the project as a whole; [and] the less it will cost, and time it will take, to get back on track.[15]

Downside

In reading through the book we did feel that it is more suited to project management practitioners working in the information technology and similar domains. While the information and advice for this area of project management application comes across as most valuable and sound, it may not be appreciated by those working in other areas such as construction and infrastructure.
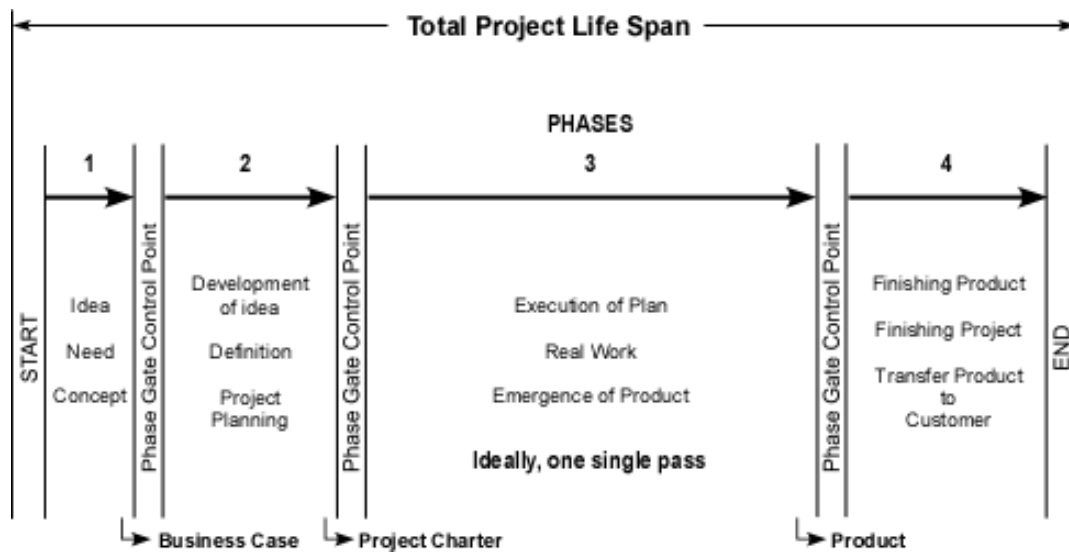
We also got the impression that the reader is assumed to be in the position of a service supplier working under contract. For example, see *What Must Happen for Stakeholders to Consider a Project Successful*, Figure 2.[16] If this is true, then from the owner or sponsor's point of view, their project is already well down the line in the execution phase.[17] The effect of this difference is that in the former the extent and quality of information on which the project is based should be much more reliable and hence amenable to the application of the tools and techniques described in the book.

Category of stakeholders	Timely completion	Completion within budget	Meeting agreed-upon requirements	Extent of functional requirements and features	Productive teaming or partnership approach	Profit realized	Follow-on business	Minimal overtime required	Appreciation and recognition	Challenging learning experience or technical growth	Being paid well	Quality	Fulfillment of terms and conditions of contract
Customer	X	X	X	X	X							X	
End user	X		X	X	X			X				X	
Customer management	X	X	X	X	X			X	X			X	
Developer project manager (PM)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Developer PM's management	X	X	X		X	X	X	X				X	X
Project team member	X		X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Subcontractors	X	X			X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
Contracts office	X												X

Figure 2: What Must Happen for Stakeholders to Consider a Project Successful[18]

In the latter, however, the quality of the data is much less certain. This is not to say that the need for thorough planning is any less important. On the contrary, such planning needs to be properly revisited as better data becomes available to avoid the misconceptions, confusion, and miss-communications that otherwise build as the project proceeds into the execution phase. The authors emphasize this point by discussing "Fact-based Management"[19] and later, instead of milestones they talk about "Planning Using Inch Stones".[20]

For the owner/sponsor, we believe that it is vital to emphasize the need for a project owner's Business Case to justify the project in the first place. This sets the stage for the project to follow a logical Total Project Life Span such as that shown in Figure 3.[21]

Total Project Life Span

PHASES

1		2		3		4	
START	Phase Gate Control Point		Phase Gate Control Point		Phase Gate Control Point		END

Phase 1: Idea, Need, Concept

Phase 2: Development of idea, Definition, Project Planning

Phase 3: Execution of Plan, Real Work, Emergence of Product — **Ideally, one single pass**

Phase 4: Finishing Product, Finishing Project, Transfer Product to Customer

→ Business Case   → Project Charter   → Product

Figure 3: The generic Total Project Life Span

Returning to the issue of how stakeholders consider a project successful, Figure 2, the problem is that certain key stakeholders, such as the owner, sponsor, users and observers generally do not view success in the same way. They look at the resulting ***product*** and ask the question: "Did it work and did it make money?" In other words, did the product produce the intended benefits? If not, the project was not a success. In short, we suggest that Figure 2 would be more inclusive if it included a final column covering the ***Benefits Realization*** phase of the ***product*** life cycle.

To their credit, the authors cite a case in which the project produced "an exceptionally, high-quality product on time and within budget . . . and the company made a profit". However, they suggest that some could still consider this project to be a failure on the grounds of excessive overtime that resulted in an exhausted team. Our experience is that overtime is often invoked because of the amount-at-stake by the end of the project and the team may be exhausted – but nevertheless happy to be done successfully.

Finally, the authors list *Scope Creep* as one of the *Key Factors Leading to Failure* "and is one of the major reasons that projects get out of control."[22]*".* While this is unfortunately true, we don't go along with their assertion that: "This scope creep occurs on all projects . . ."[23] We suggest that scope creep, as defined in the glossary, should not occur on projects that have properly implemented management controls. This has been the case for many of the projects we have worked on. However, your experience may be different depending on the type of project and your definition of "scope creep".

Summary

For those working, or contemplating working in the project fields of information technology, systems, and administrative or change projects, and the like, this book provides valuable guidance.

As the authors put it:[24]

> "*How to Save a Failing Project: Chaos to Control* provides the knowledge, insight, and tools you need to recognize a project in trouble, determine what to do about it, and transform it into a success. You'll also discover methods, techniques, and tools to keep a project from getting into trouble in the first place.
> - Use and continuously update the project plan as you execute the project
> - Recognize signs that the project is deviating from the approach needed for successful completion
> - Develop metrics that provide insight into the health of your project
> - Identify and implement steps to get your project back on track
> - Prevent missteps that can lead to project failure
> - Position your team for project success

So, if you fear that your project is failing, or is likely to do so with the symptoms we have listed, this is the book for you. It is most valuable whether for "Saving a Failing Project", or preventing it from becoming one in the first place.

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

References

[1] Young, Ralph R.; Steven M. Brady; & Dennis C. Nagle, Jr., *How to Save a Failing Project: Chaos to Control,* Management Concepts, Inc., VA, 2009, p xxii

[2] The authors dispute this observation. Their intention is that this book is written for any manager who wants to benefit from experience concerning how to achieve a successful project. In fact they state that "The information, guidance, and references in the book are applicable to any project, not just to projects in the Information Technology (IT) domain." by Email, 11/17/2010

[3] Ibid, p1

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid, pp12-13

[6] Ibid, p2

[7] Ibid, p31-33

[8] Ibid, p46

[9] Ibid, p54

[10] Ibid, p91

[11] Ibid, p111

[12] Ibid, p74

[13] Ibid, p153

[14] Ibid, p154

[15] Ibid, p176

[16] Ibid, Figure 1-2, p14. See in particular first two columns in last two rows.

[17] The authors state that this is not their intent.

[18] The authors agree that this is a very important figure. They do not agree that benefits realization, did it work, did it make money, did it produce the intended benefits, are beyond the control of the categories of stakeholders that are listed.

[19] Ibid, p57

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[20] Ibid, p71. "Inch Stones"? We like to think of them as "Inch <u>Pebbles</u>"!

[21] In the authors view, the verbiage provided here is not very insightful. In fact, they think that Figure 3 should be omitted from the discussion since it does not provide useful information. Instead, they would prefer to see additional positive comments about areas addressed in the book.

[22] Ibid, p13

[23] Ibid. The authors define *scope creep* as "The acceptance of new requirements and changes to requirements without any control or management" – Glossary p216

[24] Ibid, back cover