



Jeff Oltmann
jeff@spspro.com

transforming your ideas into action

PMI Oregon
Membership Meeting
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knowledge transfer
strategic facilitation
consulting
training
project coaching
change management

How to Rescue Troubled Projects and Programs

Slides and resources
spspro.com/clients/pmi-or-2025

Seven Steps to Recovery

1. Detect

- Admit severity of the problem

➔

2. Stabilize

- Stop life-threatening bleeding

➔

3. Diagnose

- Find root causes

↓

6. Monitor and steer

- Focus, monitor, and communicate

←

5. Regain control

- Implement recovery plan

←


4. Design recovery

- Re-aim and replan

↓

7. Prevent

- Learn from mistakes



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① Detect



Gradual deterioration
Emotional stake

“
Studies by the Software Engineering Institute have found that poor project tracking is nearly universal in "chaotic" projects (which are the vast majority).”
- McConnell, *IEEE Software*

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② Stabilize



Apply first aid

Poor performance

1. Frequent surprises and missed commitments
2. No one knows real status of program
3. Customer or management disengaged or losing confidence
4. Unrealistic expectations regarding the triple constraint

Excessive thrash

5. Solution not converging
6. Defect rate high and not dropping
7. Unresolved decisions or festering issues

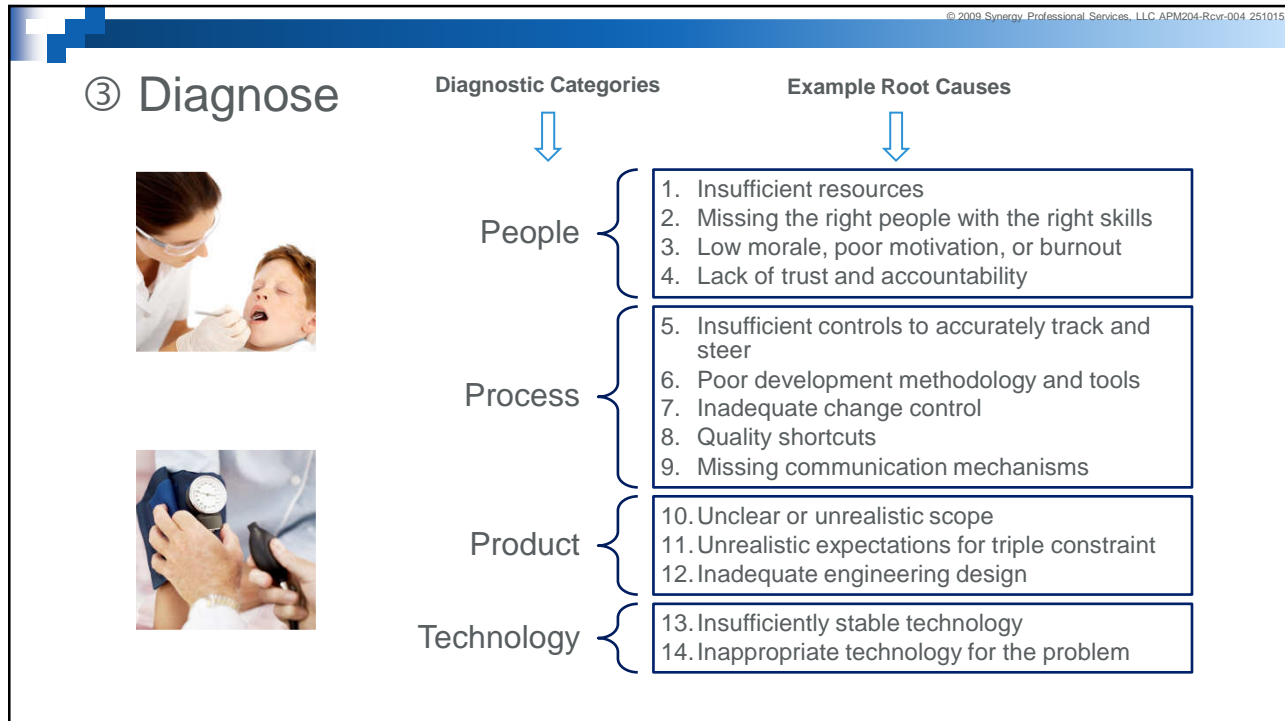
Fuzzy finish line

8. Unclear scope
9. Out of control scope growth or changes



People problems

10. Unclear roles and responsibilities
11. Low morale, trust or performance among team members
12. Sustained high overtime





The Myth

Problem 1:
Replan

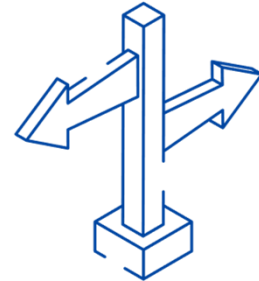
Problem 2: Finish the Project

lifepalette.com/changing-a-tire-while-still-driving



④ My Five Redesign Guideposts

- 1. There is only one chance to save patient
- 2. "Do it right" is the shortest path to success
- 3. Be unflinchingly realistic
- 4. Focus on the vital few
- 5. Plan for both short- *and* long-term victories



“This is a time for decisive action. If you’re going to make changes, make big changes and make them all at once.”
 - McConnell, *Rapid Development*


Your Turn

- A. How do you detect that a project is in enough trouble to require intervention?
- B. How do you get beyond symptoms to the real root causes of problems?
- C. What are your guiding principles for replanning a troubled project?



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④ Redesign: Verify the Target



I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Rudyard Kipling
Just So Stories

Why

1. Re-clarify project's business purpose

What

2. Update agreement on project's scope; reprioritize deliverables

Theory W

3. Agree what success looks like

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④ Reverify How, When, Who

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    graph LR
      1[1: What deliverables will this project create?] --> 2[2: What major tasks must be done to create them?]
      2 --> 3[3: How long will they take?]
      3 --> 4[4: What resources are required?]
      4 --> 5[5: Who will do what?]
      5 --> 6[6: How will we prepare for surprises?]
      5 --> 7[7: How will we ensure quality?]
      5 --> 8[8: How will we work together?]
      5 --> 9[9: How will we work with the outside world?]
      6 --> 10[10: How does everything fit together?]
      7 --> 10
      8 --> 10
      9 --> 10
  
```

Annotations:

- Step 1: What deliverables will this project create? (checked with red checkmark)
- Step 3: How long will they take? (circled in red)
- Step 4: What work remains? Update WBS or backlog. (blue box)
- Step 5: Are the development and project management approaches still appropriate? (blue box)
- Step 6: How can tasks, stories, or iterations be arranged and resources deployed to get project back on track? (blue box)
- Step 7: Intense risk management! (blue box)
- Step 10: How does everything fit together? (blue box)



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⑤ The 3 P's of Regaining Control

- Rebuild morale
- Resolve people and leadership problems
- Increase productivity

- Clean up scope
- Get to a known good state
- Take out the garbage

- Repair broken development processes
- Improve poor communication
- Institute fanatic risk management
- Install meticulous progress tracking

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⑥ Post-Op Care Is a Three-legged Stool

Intense Near-term Focus

- Set & track daily milestones
- Build confidence and momentum

Constant Communication

- Help everyone work together
- Solve problems quickly
- Celebrate progress and small victories

Frequent Progress Monitoring

- Detect deviations early
- React quickly



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Your Turn

A. How do you ensure good progress in the first few weeks after restart?

B. What are your tips for renegotiating with the project's key stakeholders?


C. How do you repair people problems when rescuing a troubled project?

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⑦ Prevent

1. Use fresh pain to motivate preventative action
2. Learn lessons using a retrospective

Prevent fires – and don't reward arsonists!



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Call to Action

- First, admit the severity of the problems
- Take time to find root causes and resist pressure for quick fixes
- Fix people, process, product, and technology problems
- Invest in prevention



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jeff@spspro.com

