

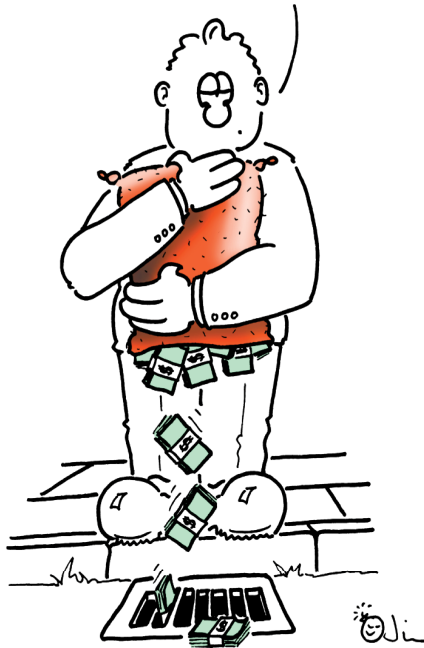


I've started, but should I finish?

This Lucid Thought explores the difficulties some people and some organisations have in stopping projects. In most instances good project management is associated with delivering a project's defined scope, on time, within budget and to the agreed specification such that its benefits can be hopefully achieved. However good project management sometimes means stopping a project before it has delivered any or all of its desired outcomes; to prevent investment for no benefit. So when should you stop a project? The 'text book' of project management would suggest that there is basically only one answer, which is when the business case is no longer valid. If only it was that simple! Following a recent experience we would like to add that deciding when a business case is no longer valid can be very difficult - a subjective judgement-call rather than an objective assessment.

Like many of you reading this article we have learned that to stop a project is far easier said than done. The phrase used for many years by Magnus Magnusson on the BBC's Mastermind programme "I've started so I'll finish" immediately springs to mind. We are fairly sure that anyone reading this can think of at least one project that should have been stopped a long time before it was completed.

"I just need a little bit more cash to turn this project around... honest"



So why is this?

Unfortunately to some individuals and/or organisations, failing to complete a project is in itself a failure and this will clearly drive behaviour to keep going, but there seems to be many other reasons too. **Maybe these are some of them?**

Emotional attachment - when we work on projects we often expend a lot of emotional energy. We are asked to 'believe in the project', 'own the project', 'take responsibility' etc. All of these mean that we can easily get attached to what we are doing. The thought of the project being taken away can mean that we will do our utmost to prevent it. It might be seen as losing an old friend.

Confirmation trap - when we are concerned about the viability of our project we often seek only evidence that defends our desire to continue the project. This is not necessarily deliberate but a known psychological phenomenon in which our brain subconsciously prevents us from seeing the things we don't want to see. The evidence we see confirms our

view that the project should continue.

Where's my next job - for some people working on projects is their only source of employment and therefore income. Where this is the case it is no wonder that their behaviour is such that they try to prolong a project as long as they can.

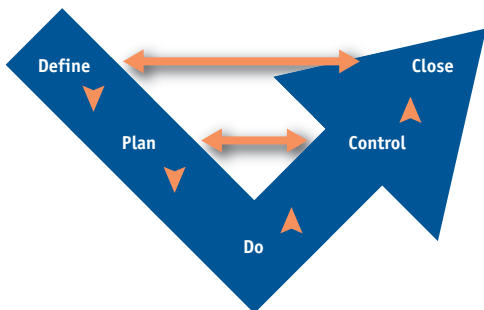


Fear of not reaching personal goals - many organisations manage staff performance through the setting of goals that are linked to personal remuneration. Where completing a particular project is one of your goals, it is likely that many people will continue to deliver the project rather than put what is best for the organisation and its investment ahead of the personal motivation. Personal targets are often perverse, driving the wrong behaviours.

Fear of disappointing the sponsor - where a sponsor has a very clear idea what they'd like to achieve, it can often be difficult to challenge them and potentially disappoint them. This is particularly difficult if you are delivering a project for a client organisation, where the perceived short-term impact of disappointing the sponsor may be to lose the business. But is delivering and then failing a more significant risk to long-term credibility?

Sunk-cost bias - it has been demonstrated in experiments that human beings have an irrational perception of sunk costs, i.e. money that has already been spent and cannot be recovered. This can be summed up by the popular saying; **"you must not throw good money after bad"**. It seems that somehow we can become blinded into believing that if we just continue the investment the project can be **'turned-around'**.

So here are some reasons that make it difficult to know whether it's right to **STOP** or **CLOSE** a project early, and it seems to us that the key to knowing is directly linked to our ability to **START** or **DEFINE** projects competently in the first place.



This articulation of a "V" life cycle, actually discussed in our very first Lucid Thought in 2003, shows the clear links between definition and closure. It can be interpreted as **"when defining, think through what you will need to have at closure for the project to be a success, or what conditions would mean that you should stop because the benefits can no longer be achieved"**.

From a closing early perspective, you need to understand the business case agreed in definition very well in order to know objectively that the project is no longer viable. In our own recent case, what we learned is that the sponsor's drivers for the project were not clearly enough understood in the first place. We also learned that keeping the sponsor happy in the short-term is not always the right thing for long-term satisfaction or to ensure a return on investment.

In addition to having a clear understanding of the business case - both the financials and any other desired benefits - suggesting as a project manager that a project should be stopped also takes significant personal mastery. This is a subject that we've discussed before, not least in recent Lucid Thoughts about conflict resolution. At the heart of such difficult conversations is an ability to separate the issue at hand (the continued viability of the project) from the people (how you feel, or perceive others will feel if you recommend that the project is stopped). While it would be wrong to ignore the personal perspectives of stakeholders, it would be more wrong to continue to invest shareholder or public funds in a project that was going nowhere good.

So should you finish just because you've started?
Clearly not! Hopefully this gives all of us an opportunity to reflect on our personal work situation and where we are perhaps doggedly pursuing opportunities that deserve to be laid to rest.

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