



Project Courage

How to sidestep the organizational death march

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Another failed project—stumbling over (or short of) the finish line, millions over budget, with the survivors gasping for breath as they try to make sense of the last two or three years of their lives. The ultimate cost of these "death march" projects (a term coined by software engineering guru Edward Yourdon) is beyond what any organization can afford to pay. These projects cut the creative and risk-taking soul out of an organization. Good people leave, survivors hide and cynics abound. These projects might not constitute a large portion of your total project portfolio, but they account for a very large portion of expenditures and credibility (or lack thereof).



Death march projects don't evolve into disasters by accident; the seeds of destruction are planted at inception. The sad fact is that there are many who know in advance that these projects are doomed to failure. Death march projects exist because some choose to take the path of least resistance and hear what they want to hear, do what they are told and hope for miracles. The only antidote for death march projects is courage. Not the "take this job and shove it" type of courage, but the courage to pull victory out of the jaws of defeat by breaking apart the toxic combination of time, scope, resources, and risk that defines a death march project. Consider the following actions as you manage the most toxic elements of difficult projects.

Trump them on timeframe. Demand that the organization figure out how to deliver something quicker than the prescribed timeframe, rather than fighting the battle of "It can't be done and this is why." If you make the timeframe short enough, it's easier for everybody to see what is possible and what is not. Introducing an across-the-board, mandatory time box of six months for business value delivery is powerful because it gets everybody to master the art of making hard choices. One exec calls this the game of sequencing versus prioritization. Just because something is a top priority doesn't mean that the solution is close at hand. In fact, it's quite the opposite. If something is a top priority, there are good reasons why it has been allowed to persist. The trick is to identify and sequence those activities (read: smaller, quick-cycle, learning-based initiatives) that help the organization better understand the problem.

Play the numbers game. Demand a business case that makes sense and then use it to filter the requirements and manage the project scope. Use the "results chain" concept discussed in John Thorp's book, *The Information Paradox*, to ensure that the benefits are well defined and the work necessary to mine them is well understood. Require that every request for additional funding is bounced against the original business case. Kill projects, in the words of one CIO, "once the budget has been adjusted twice and there is still no beta level deployment." Learn to understand the historical relationship between work effort (a.k.a. the dreaded function points) and resources and time so that your organization has credible estimating data. Build your capability to monitor progress—rather than effort—by leveraging use cases, visual

prototypes and "daily builds."

Stack the deck. Make sure there is real sponsorship for a project by ensuring that responsibility for specific business results (operational as well as financial) is assigned to business sponsors. Keep project accountability simple by keeping it "single nose." Select a project executive who is acceptable to both you and the sponsors and let him or her have the authority to do things (for instance, team selection, facilities, equipment, tools, processes and technology). Make the project management office work for the project executive (rather than the other way around) by adding value rather than bureaucracy. Don't introduce any new processes, tools or technology and keep the team exempt from all overhead activities.

Sort it out early. Neutralizing the toxic elements of death march projects requires that you get started on developing the policies and skills outlined above well in advance of any heat-of-the-moment project negotiations. The seeds of a project's success, or failure, are planted at the beginning stages, so this is where you need to roll up your sleeves. When the time is right, you need to summon the courage to act decisively and reject the temptations to leverage your positional power to get others to say what you want to hear.

As an executive, my greatest fear was that my staff would do exactly what I told them to do rather than challenging me and working with me to develop industrial-strength solutions. It takes a lot of courage to face issues and negotiate with customers and the powers that be. Trust your organization, fight back your fear of failure and do what's right for the good of all.

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