

Keep Your Team Motivated When a Project Goes Off the Rails

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According to a report by TeamStage, 70% of projects globally fail. And big projects, with greater complexity and more moving parts, fail at significant rates. This can be for a variety of reasons, ranging from passive project sponsors and inadequate resources to a shifting organizational context or lack of internal alignment and stakeholder buy-in.

Poorly performing projects not only impact the bottom line, they also, understandably, impact morale and engagement. If one of your projects is going sideways or south, here are some ways to motivate your team to help get things back on track.

Re-establish or re-define the project purpose, goals, and vision.

The project may not be going well because the organization's goals and vision aren't clear. In fact, a lack of clear goals is the most common factor, leading to 37% of project failures. A changing internal and external organizational context could affect the relevance of the project goals or stakeholder buy-in, as priorities shift. According to TeamStage, 44% of projects fail due to lack of alignment between the business and the project goals.

Getting the team together to re-establish or re-define these goals can breathe a second life into the project — assuming the context hasn't changed so much that the project is no longer

relevant. No one likes working on “road to nowhere.” Research from the Standish Group shows that more than 30% of projects will get cancelled prior to completion. According to Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, author of HBR’s Project Management Handbook, “Consider revising the project charter if necessary.”

As part of this process, make sure you have executive sponsorship for the project. The TeamStage study also shared that 62% of successfully completed projects had supportive sponsors. Nieto-Rodriguez shared that “Having a high-level executive articulate the project’s importance to the organization can give the team a renewed sense of purpose.”

Involve the team in trouble-shooting and defining the path forward.

Enlist the team in trouble-shooting in a collaborative way that doesn’t place blame, but seeks to get to the root cause and find a better path forward. Nieto-Rodriguez recommends holding a “state of the project” meeting where “everyone can express concerns and offer solutions without fear of retribution.”

As the team leader, you can also create psychological safety and model a growth mindset by going first in sharing mistakes that you’ve made that might have contributed to the project’s lackluster performance and what you’ve learned from them. In these meetings, encourage open communication and transparency, which not only builds trust, but also empowers the team to find a solution together. This reinforces a sense of “being in it together,” which can bring a greater sense of motivation for the team.

Help remove obstacles.

A key part of your job as project leader is to help remove obstacles for the team. This includes re-prioritizing or re-assigning other work, and re-allocating resources for the project — including people, time, and budget. According to the Standish Group research, more than 50% of projects will cost almost double the original budget estimates. “If possible, reallocate resources to alleviate bottlenecks,” Nieto-Rodriguez suggests. “This may involve bringing in additional team members, extending timelines, or securing more budget.”

Another obstacle you can eliminate as project leader is to provide role clarity for your team members. Role clarity can prevent the duplication of effort, working at cross-purposes, or the unnecessary friction on the team and morale issues that come with stepping on other people’s toes.

Another one of these bottlenecks might be you. By empowering decision making amongst the project team members, not every decision needs to come to you. You can still give general guidance as to what’s important to consider in these decisions, where you want to be kept informed, and what needs to be escalated to you.

Understand what motivates different team members.

While some general principles will apply for everyone when it comes to motivating your project team, also recognize that different people are motivated by different things. Nieto-Rodriguez points out that “some are motivated by public recognition, others by monetary incentives, and still others by career development opportunities. Tailoring your approach can go a long way.” Know what “currencies” are most important to each of your team members and what you have to offer to them individually. In addition to the ones mentioned above, these currencies can

include visibility, gratitude or appreciation, support, creative freedom, or intellectual challenge, among others.

Connect regularly as a team.

Scheduling a standing weekly project meeting can help create regular feedback loops about what's working and what's not working so course corrections can be made in a timely way, thereby keeping the project on track and increasing the chances of success. These regular check-ins will also allow the team to get important issues on the table for key discussions, debate, and decisions – while straightforward status updates can be done asynchronously on platforms like Slack.

These meetings can also provide the opportunity to do some team building in order to strengthen the relationships and connective tissue amongst team members, as well as ensure ongoing alignment. Nieto-Rodriguez shared, “Depending on the project's urgency, a short team-building session away from work can often reset the team's energy and improve collaboration.”

Celebrate small wins and provide recognition.

Recognizing small wins can help mark progress for the team and raise their spirits. Celebrating project milestones as a team can not only boost morale, but also gives the team a sense of traction against their goals and feelings of optimism. Nieto-Rodriguez shared that achieving even minor milestones can be a source of motivation.

In addition, providing individual recognition that is personalized can also help motivate team members, keeping in mind that introverts tend to prefer more private, one-on-one recognition and extroverts tend to appreciate more public recognition.

By focusing on the above strategies, you can both re-energize your project team and help put a poorly performing project back on track, creating a virtuous cycle that leads to the project and team's success.