

# PHOENIX SYNDROME

Deborah J Smith, Lucid IT

## INTRODUCTION

The Roman poet Ovid told the story of the Phoenix – a mythical bird that burns itself in the flames of a fire so that it may be reborn from the ashes. The Phoenix is resurrected to embark on the next phase of its life journey.

Drawn from this mythology, ‘Phoenix’ is the name often applied to projects that are intended to be the ‘resurrection’ of a failed initiative. This metaphor, however apt, is the proverbial ‘slap in the face’ for those individuals who worked long, hard hours in the initial attempt to successfully deliver the business benefits. In a climate where more projects fail than succeed, exploring how we can successfully lead project team members in ‘re-implementation’ endeavours is paramount to helping the Phoenix ‘rise from the ashes’ – for those projects where the business case remains sound. Your project failure may well prove to be the birthplace of its success.

This paper describes an approach to leading a ‘Project Phoenix’ to successful completion, where it has been determined that the business benefits are still realisable. It outlines the major steps involved in understanding: how and why the project wound up in ashes in the first place; what the project team are likely to be experiencing and how you can engage them in identifying a way forward; what the barriers might be in progressing with your re-implementation; and, ultimately, how to bring your ‘Project Phoenix’ back on track. As the traditional Chinese proverb pithily asserts, “Failure lies not in falling down. Failure lies in not getting up”.

## WHERE TO START?

### **With yourself of course!**

So, the Executive have decided it was worth having a second bite at delivering the business benefits. Chances are that you forgot to stand back when they called for volunteers to be the new Project Manager expected to redeem the project. You are also fully aware that your new project is currently as popular as the grilled tofu on the menu of your local steakhouse, and that the previous Project Manager has ‘moved on to pursue other career interests’. You are now expected to deliver the project in a way that proves you are the Chosen One.

In all likelihood, you already have a few preconceived ideas about why the previous project failed. First and foremost, they didn’t have you as PM. Secondly ‘they’ didn’t do Task A properly and completely forgot to do Task B, and.....then you pause.....and look out past the steam rising from your coffee cup.....and realise that everything you know about the debacle has come from third-hand conversations from the kitchen, rather than being conclusions drawn out of the facts. There are times in life that as leaders we need to rise above the careless slanders and suppositions about things we really know nothing about. This is one of those times.

I have often heard the phrase “it’s just work....nothing personal”. I doubt that many of us are able to successfully detach our ego and self-esteem from the work we do. As Project Manager carrying the mantle of leadership, you need to ensure that in your natural desire to prove your capabilities (and, hence, satisfy your own ego) you do not belittle your team through criticising their efforts to date. Remember, no-one ever sets out to fail.

### **And now your team...**

You need to go out of your way to let the team hear the message that you understand that they are physically and emotionally tired, that their efforts to date are recognised and appreciated. They need to know and that you truly believe that, together, the desired outcome will be achieved. Even a successful project will take a toll on team members due to the typically aggressive timelines that they are delivered to. This effort should never go unrecognised, if an organisation is to encourage future commitment from their people. Certainly, in cases of ‘above and beyond’ performance, avenues for reward should also be pursued to promote a high-performing environment. But what about when the project has failed? Has the marathon runner who is last to cross the finish line run any fewer metres than the victor who broke the tape?

In reality, the team would much rather see your re-implementation project relegated to the back of the out-of-reach shelf, where it will fade amongst the other long-forgotten appliances stored in the kitchen graveyard. Thus, a key part of gaining your people’s commitment to continue the race will be through recognition of how far they have already run, and helping them to visualise a different and more positive outcome in the future. In this way, you will have completed your first ‘organisational change management’ exercise in ‘your own backyard’, with your project team.

In addition to creating this shared vision where the team truly believe they are working on something that truly matters, you will be in establishing a sense of urgency through helping them understand how important it is to realise the project benefits – this time. No doubt, this will be the reality handed down by your organisation’s management team, as the demands on businesses today simply do not afford the opportunity for people to recite the adage “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again”. This is, simply, the last chance, and the team need to understand this.

But is focusing on the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow going to be sufficient for you to move forward? Or is there something else that needs to be addressed first?

### **And today’s oxymoron is “Lessons Learned”**

The Nobel Laureate Pearl S Buck observed that “one faces the future with one’s past”. Recognise that your project was, and is, people. Your team are highly likely to approach the project in the same way as they did before. This makes it all the more critical for you to lead an open and non-judgemental process of reviewing what lessons have been learned from the previous iteration of the project. Without doing this, you are likely to reinforce George Bernard Shaw’s view that “we learn from history that we learn nothing from history”, and as such, you may join your former PM colleague in ‘pursuing other career interests’.

You may want to consider enlisting the services of an experienced facilitator who is not part of the organisation, as staff are likely to want to ‘unload’ during this time, as part of their

journey forward. This cathartic experience can only ensue if the environment in which the debriefing occurs is perceived as having no relationship to the Spanish Inquisition. In other words, you must place equal focus on 'what worked well' as on 'what didn't work well', and utilise the environment to practise your active listening skills. Keep in the foremost part of your mind that you are trying to encourage honesty from your team, and as such, any negative or sarcastic remarks or rolling of the eyes from you will effectively guarantee future guarded responses.

In garnering support for this process, it is worthwhile noting the team's enhanced position, in that it can now identify the location, size and method of explosion associated with many of the project's 'mines'. Taking a position that shows your desire to learn from the team will also establish an environment of mutual respect. Consider utilising the forum as part of your Recognition Strategy for your team members and employ the management technique attributed to Catherine the Great: praising loudly and blaming softly.

Naturally, this will not entirely remove the trepidation of your people in proceeding under the new Phoenix banner, but it will go a long way in winning their trust and ultimately, lessening the risk profile you and your team face.

### **But will they be allowed to move on?**

You have now started your Project Phoenix with enthusiasm, and have led your team to believe that they can deliver this time. But will your own leadership allow the team to move forward?

Successful projects rely on committed and enthusiastic leaders guiding their teams in achieving their endeavours. Sadly, there is too often immaturity amongst the leadership team and people end up on the receiving end of thoughtless and disparaging comments uttered in open forums.

In your role as Project Manager, it is important that you reinforce not only the operational roles taken by leadership associated with the project, but also the part they play in assisting the project team in moving forward. Remind your Steering Committee or Project Board that careless and sweeping criticisms of the team will potentially negate the Project Sponsor's ability to ultimately deliver the Business Case benefits.

## **TIME TO GET MOVING**

### **The plan the plan**

As an experienced Project Manager, having determined the pitfalls to avoid in the future of this project, you now need to pull together the plan that will enable you to deliver the business case. If you are wise, you will take advantage of your team's experience and make the development of the project plan a participatory process. Let them own the Project Approach, own the Plan, and own the changes they will be making to the way they did things before. They will not change and do things differently this time simply because you are commanding them to make it so.

One useful method is to start the planning process by organising a brainstorming session to capture all of the products to be delivered by the project. Clearly there is benefit to be gained

through you individually, as Project Manager, reviewing the previous project plans and the actuals recorded therein. However, a collective planning initiative with your team is more likely to be stifled by trying to re-engineer the old plans. You do not want to limit people's creativity in finding new solutions to old problems through immediately locking them into the mindset of their historically linear and structured plans. Consider employing techniques such as mind maps to assist in visualising, structuring and classifying products. Only when this process is complete, should you return with vigour to the land of Gantt.

## **AND KEEP MOVING**

### **Plan Do CHECK Act**

Having developed your new Project Plan, your team's efforts are now underway. As a Project Manager, being a control freak may come naturally to you. If you are blessed, and this is not part of your genetic code, it is strongly recommended that you have a well-defined method for controlling the progress of your project. There are any number of methods around – the challenge comes in their execution, as people do not readily submit themselves or their actions to scrutiny.

This is another location where project management is an art-form. Having the capability to exert control and employ these management techniques without using the rhetoric of the 'PM Methodology Zealots', will stand you in good stead with your team.

Ultimately, the Deming Plan-Do-Check-Act quality improvement cycle will only work for you if you keep your eye on the ball through checking: the quality of work being performed by your team; their adherence to the plan; and managing any Issues and Risks that will, most certainly, arise throughout your project. Ensure that you have time built into your Project Plan for Quality Reviews and for managing the Issues and Risks.

### **Groundhog Day?**

As a talented Project Manager you will no doubt have clearly defined Roles and Responsibilities. It is quite possible that some of the issues that derailed the project previously will raise their heads again, having not been addressed adequately in the past. Your challenge now will be to decide the best course of action, that is, do you:

- (a) Assign ownership of issue resolution to the same person who failed to resolve it in the past (simply because it is their role within the project);
- (b) Assign ownership of issue resolution to a person who isn't actually responsible for it, but they are capable of resolving the issue; or
- (c) Attempt to resolve the issue yourself.

There is no single solution here, but whichever option is chosen, consider whether you are taking the most expedient path, or the correct path that reinforces ownership, roles and responsibilities. Ultimately, you may need to enlist the services of your Project Sponsor to positively reinforce ownership of the solution.

### **It's OK to be a little paranoid...**

It is perfectly natural that you will question the opinions of team members who were originally involved in the failed implementation. This is not unreasonable, considering that a project's failure is typically associated with people's mistakes. Trust your instincts, but if you do choose to introduce a second opinion into the recipe, it would be prudent to reinforce with your team that the measure is as an additional quality protocol, as opposed to a lack of faith in individuals.

Involve your team in the quality planning processes, and if effectively facilitated, you may well find they themselves suggest a 'second opinion' be sought.

### **CONCLUSION**

You have an opportunity to make a real difference with your Project Phoenix, and with your team, realise the anticipated business benefits. Observing your people's confidence build throughout the project lifecycle will possibly be the greatest reward for you personally. Delivering a Project Phoenix that rises from the flames and takes flight is what sorts real Project Leaders from mere Project Managers.