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Protect Your Project From Escalating Doubts

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Protect Your Project From Escalating Doubts

Important projects can easily get caught in a downward spiral if key stakeholders start questioning the project's progress and withdrawing support. Savvy executives should be aware of common issues that can cause stakeholder skepticism — and take action to avert the "cycle of doubt" before it takes hold.

BY KAREN A. BROWN, NANCY LEA HYER, AND RICHARD ETTENSON

YOUR PROJECT BEGAN with a bang. The launch created positive buzz, and you have a solid plan to deliver on the initiative's value proposition. Stakeholders who will drive the project forward are squarely behind it. What could go wrong?

Plenty, as it turns out. But some leaders are unaware that great projects with strong starts can stumble and fall into what we call the "cycle of doubt," when support wanes or dissipates, delivery is imperiled, and objectives go unmet. Others may recognize the potential for diminishing post-launch support among key contributors but are not attuned to the telltale warning signs, nor do they have safeguards in place to protect a project's reputation and momentum against a downward spiral.

Consider the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) NextGen satellite-based air traffic system initiative, which has a broad network of contributors crucial to delivery, including the FAA, airports, airlines, and aircraft manufacturers. Project advocates emphasize the technology's value in modernizing and improving the efficiency of the entire U.S. National Airspace System. Despite its compelling raison d'être (and the fact that the FAA has been on time and on budget installing advanced towers for tracking aircraft[1]), the multibillion-dollar NextGen project has fallen into the cycle of doubt. If the FAA's ground towers are to achieve their intended purpose, the U.S. airline industry must update the technology on its aircraft, at a cost of billions of dollars.[2] However, many airlines have been less than enthusiastic about proceeding because they lack faith in the FAA's ability to ensure timely delivery of related aspects of the project (such as training for controllers) that are necessary for its success. Why?

According to an executive with the trade group Airlines for America, "There's history here. . . . We have equipped our planes at great expense, and then it takes the FAA three years to train controllers and design processes where we can benefit."[3] Because of such doubts, most carriers have been slow to implement the new technology. In 2015, the FAA agreed to allow airlines to apply for extensions of the 2020 installation deadline to as late as 2025 for some satellite navigation upgrades.[4] Meanwhile, in 2016, a U.S. inspector general's report indicated that the cost of NextGen could double or triple by the time the system is fully installed,[5] adding to stakeholders' concerns.

THE LEADING QUESTION

How can executives prevent their projects from losing momentum due to stakeholder doubts?

FINDINGS

- **If skeptical stakeholders withdraw support, projects can spiral downward in a cycle of doubt.**
- **Be aware of factors that trigger stakeholder doubts, such as communication missteps.**
- **There are steps executives can take to avert or reverse a cycle of doubt.**

The FAA story is not unique. Our multiyear, practice-based investigation reveals that escalating stakeholder doubts can debilitate projects large and small, regardless of business model, sector, for-profit or nonprofit status, or organizational mission. The experienced project leaders we studied cited case after case of worthy initiatives that started strong but were soon undermined by doubt. Here are three representative examples from our research interviews:

- A project to implement lean manufacturing at a Fortune 100 technology company suffered a sharp decline in its reputation when the site-level project champion was promoted and relocated to another company facility.
- The development of a new product at a specialty electronics company was derailed when team members realized that the work's complexity and scope exceeded their expectations. Support melted

away as contributors diverted their efforts to other projects with more achievable milestones and more straightforward task assignments. As performance deteriorated, these key contributors further disassociated themselves from the sinking initiative.

- A series of social responsibility initiatives at a global energy company lost critical momentum when more urgent, regulation-driven projects unexpectedly entered the company's project portfolio.

In this article, we rely on multiple sources of field research across a range of industries and project types to (1) introduce and explain the dynamic we call the cycle of doubt; (2) present a set of often-overlooked factors that can send even the most worthy initiatives into tailspins; (3) offer action steps to help project leaders avoid and remedy these negative forces; and (4) provide diagnostic checklists and tips for remediation. (See "About the Research.")

Understanding the Cycle of Doubt

A project's post-launch reputation influences the level of favor it enjoys among those whose energy and support are critical to delivery of results.[6] Shifting organizational priorities, changes in leadership, and distrust of information about the project's progress can scuttle a project's reputation and, ultimately, its chances for success. These negative forces can act together, trapping the project in a downward spiral. A senior leader at a Fortune 500 chemical company summarized the problem of negative momentum this way:

When a project develops a bad reputation, people begin to stay in their offices and avoid face-to-face discussions to address issues and solve problems. They do not want to be associated with a bad project. And a project in trouble typically gets in worse trouble as people stay away from it.

When a project's status suffers, it can be starved of the fuel it needs to move forward. The process is self-perpetuating, resulting in the dynamic we call the cycle of doubt. (See "The Dynamics of the Cycle of Doubt.") Regardless of the status of time, cost, and performance metrics, an infusion of doubt can degrade a project's reputation, leading to a downward spiral that can feed on itself. But the spiral can be averted or reversed with the right diagnostics and appropriate actions.

The first step in combating the cycle of doubt is to understand its causes. Our research uncovered four key categories of triggers that can draw a project into the cycle of doubt: priorities, leadership, delivery, and messaging. (See "Triggers That Contribute to the Cycle of Doubt," p. 82.) Within each of these categories, we identify a set of specific and common triggers of doubt and their effects.

In our experience, organizations will benefit if project leaders understand three related issues: (1) how to recognize if a project is vulnerable to the cycle of doubt; (2) how to ensure that a project does not fall into a downward spiral of skepticism; and (3) how to reverse negative momentum if a project begins to stall. As we advise below, time spent developing a deep understanding of the full range of threats to a project's reputation is a worthwhile investment.

Recovering a Project's Momentum

In our experience, most complex projects include some doubt triggers. Once those doubt triggers are

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

For more than a decade, the authors have taught project leadership to executives in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Based on a study published in *MIT Sloan Management Review*,[i] we have introduced "project branding" into our executive programs to alert business leaders to the importance of establishing positive and enduring reputations for projects in their organizations. This idea resonates strongly with project leaders and generates animated discussions. During these discussions, executives across a wide range of industries consistently tell us that one of their most serious challenges is sustaining momentum for their initiatives all the way to closure.

With this in mind, we used systematic observation across multiple, relevant, practice-based sources to develop and refine an effective conceptual framework and develop action steps for project leaders struggling to understand why projects falter and how to remedy stalled momentum. Specifically, we (1) engaged in more than 100 informal interviews with business leaders who attended our executive seminars and had major responsibilities for executing and/or supporting project initiatives within their organizations; (2) analyzed and identified critical themes in successful and unsuccessful high-profile projects chronicled in the global business press; and (3) carried out 20 facilitated in-depth interviews with veteran project leaders from a range of sectors. Specific industries included technology, energy, chemical, manufacturing, financial services, medical devices, and government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The aim of these structured and intensive interviews (some lasting more than two hours) was to reveal and chronicle the "rich content" behind the challenges each project leader had faced in maintaining momentum and the action steps taken (both successful and unsuccessful) to remedy or avoid derailment.

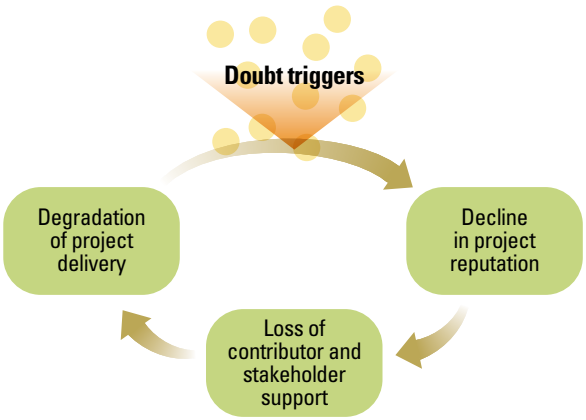
revealed, the project leader must address the next two issues: how to prevent momentum stall, and how to reverse any downward spiral caused by the cycle of doubt. Our practice-based investigation has uncovered eight action steps project leaders may consider to stabilize or recover a project's momentum. We also offer a ninth recommendation for times when a project's reputation and performance simply cannot be salvaged. While this list of remedial actions offers a range of useful options, savvy project leaders will use their experience and nuanced understanding of their project's context (such as the organization's politics, processes, and practicalities) to implement the specific action step or combination of action steps most effective for addressing their particular project challenge.

1. Prove the concept. When the stakes are high, viability is uncertain, and strong resistance or apathy are possibilities, project leaders can generate enthusiasm and pave the way for a successful large-scale effort by proving value in limited and successive stages. Of course, the option of a pilot may not be feasible if a project has a very tight deadline that does not afford time for experimentation. One executive at a cybersecurity company who did not face such constraints expressed the scenario this way: "I learned early in my career that the big-bang delivery of large projects simply doesn't work." An example of generating achievement in stages is the approach taken by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Apollo program, which began in 1963 and hit its peak with Apollo 11's moon landing and safe return to Earth six years later. Each Apollo mission added incrementally to program momentum by proving feasibility, and revealing and resolving "unknown unknowns."[7]

A more recent success story is the U.S. Department of Justice's Smart Policing Initiative.[8] Select police departments across the U.S. were chosen to receive federal funding to implement community policing and data-driven, strategic problem-solving and resource allocation. Performance of a pilot program in a major U.S. city demonstrated significant drops in homicides and other violent crimes.[9] One of our interviewees, a senior leader involved in the national rollout, observed that positive word of mouth generated from this single site delivered a powerful boost in smart-policing participation rates in police departments across the country.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE CYCLE OF DOUBT

Many projects are launched with high praise and promise but lose traction and momentum during project delivery, once the real work is underway. This self-perpetuating downward spiral can cause contributors to distance themselves from an effort that is losing support, cannot overcome inertia, or worse, is derailed.



The FAA's NextGen project offers an example of concept proof but also raises caution about the difficulty of breaking a project free from the cycle of doubt once it has negative momentum. Alaska Air Group Inc. implemented the FAA tracking technology on its aircraft ahead of other carriers and has touted the benefits of the new system.[10] Even with demonstrated success on a limited scale and strong praise from this early adopter, other carriers remained skeptical of the FAA's ability to roll out the project in its entirety and hesitant to participate fully in the initiative.[11] The lesson here is that the project leader needs to identify the right blend of the eight action steps, as one alone may be insufficient to reverse a steep decline in reputation and momentum.

An additional consideration about proving the concept is that the revelation of weak points and nonstarters in a small-scale effort can save the project's leader and contributors from having a large-scale disaster on their résumés. At worst, the team will have carried out a limited or "quiet failure," one that did not squander major company resources, expose the organization to long-term or high-profile risk, or subject the project leader's personal reputation to a major organization-wide embarrassment.

2. Keep it short or break it up. Shorter projects are less likely than longer ones to be victims of diverted attention or changing priorities, because shorter projects hit the finish line before they can be overshadowed by new initiatives. A senior project

TRIGGERS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE CYCLE OF DOUBT

Project leaders who are aware of the kinds of circumstances that trigger stakeholder skepticism are better positioned to take steps to avert negative momentum before it derails a project. Here is a list of some of the most common triggers that can launch or exacerbate the cycle of doubt.

ASPECT OF PROJECT	TRIGGERS OF DOUBT
Priorities	• **Shifting Priorities:** More urgent or strategically important projects divert attention and resources. • **Forgotten or Fading "Why"**[ii]**:** Project leaders fail to keep the project's purpose, vision, and strategic value in the forefront, leading to "so what" attitudes, fading motivation, and diminished contributions from key constituencies. • **Conflicts About What to Prioritize:** Differences among stakeholders regarding the relative importance of time, cost, and scope (often referred to as the "triple constraint" of project management) result in team members working at cross-purposes.
Leadership	• **Musical Chairs:** Changing the project sponsor or project leader results in diminished clout and continuity in project vision and approach, undermining the project's status. • **Sponsors Missing in Action:** Fading support from key executives trickles down and negatively influences the attitudes of others in the organization.[iii] • **Self-Serving Agendas:** Stakeholders lose trust and withdraw if it becomes apparent that the project leader is motivated by self-serving goals rather than by a legitimate business purpose.
Delivery	• **Delays in Deliverables:** The project fails to meet expected deadlines for intermediate deliverables, causing contributors and other stakeholders to become discouraged and disengage. • **Viability Concerns:** Stakeholders disassociate themselves when completed deliverables have not met performance expectations or outcomes do not show a clear path to the initiative's business promise. • **Unrealistic Workloads:** When the actual work begins, project contributors who were on board at launch realize workloads exceed their expectations and/or capacity. • **Long Project Duration:** Projects that extend over a long time frame are increasingly vulnerable to apathy, fatigue, and attacks from detractors.
Messaging	• **Communication Vacuum:** Key stakeholders do not receive timely project updates and lose confidence in project performance. Rumors and speculation fill the void and can drift into social media and the press. • **Tyranny of Distance:** The locus of project activity is geographically remote from important stakeholders, resulting in communication lags, gaps, and misunderstandings.[iv] • **Inflated Performance Reports:** Stakeholders become discouraged if they discover the project leader has painted a falsely rosy picture of work completed and outcomes achieved. • **Negativity Bias:** Progress reports emphasize negative outcomes and fail to highlight even small successes, creating an unfavorable project brand. • **Failure to Listen:** Contributors disengage when they do not believe their ideas, insights, and concerns are being heard or taken seriously.

leader with more than 1,000 projects completed described to us a project that went into freefall because he thought he was "too smart to fail, despite a scope that was too large to deliver as a single unit." As the project dragged on, contributors lost interest, support eroded, and the reputations of both the project and the project leader plummeted.

An experienced project leader in the health care industry said a key strategy for avoiding the cycle of doubt and maintaining project momentum is to, "wherever possible, scope the project to objectives that can be accomplished in three to six months." For large projects with distant time horizons, this can mean breaking the project into meaningful subprojects, each with measurable results, like each of NASA's Apollo missions. For some projects, however, partitioning may not be feasible or advantageous. The project leader must determine whether a project can be meaningfully divided into subparts with shorter windows for deliverables.

3. Dedicate and, if possible, colocate the core team. For initiatives significant enough to justify a dedicated team, assigning members full time and colocating them has demonstrable advantages. It signals organizational commitment, accelerates momentum, and compresses delivery time, all of which reduce vulnerability to the cycle of doubt. Consider the experience of an electronics industry CEO. When a strategically vital corporate initiative with physically dispersed, part-time contributors began

to spin into the cycle of doubt, the CEO decided it was time to disrupt the status quo by dedicating core team members full-time to the project and moving them together physically. Close proximity and the deliberate elimination of distractions created a cohesive, enthusiastic, and collaborative environment. Not surprisingly, the project soon regained positive traction and achieved important deliverables. While colocation may not always be possible for global projects that involve geographically dispersed team members, significant purposeful changes that are visible (such as dedicating team members full-time to the project) generally elevate the project's profile and reputation among its core team members, as well as among stakeholders on the periphery.

4. Beware the rush to action. Potentially great projects can be compromised if there is pressure or misguided enthusiasm to initiate tasks before appropriate planning and risk assessment have been completed. One recent study found that great projects — those that exceed expectations and create superior value for their organizations — begin with a "long period of project definition" dedicated to clarifying the need for the project, planning the best execution method, and assuring stakeholder buy-in.[12]

In contrast, an impetuous leap to action can lead to predictably negative outcomes. One executive we interviewed described it as "the nonsense of action everywhere and traction nowhere." Once again, the FAA offers a cautionary tale: A sense of urgency to move forward with the NextGen project led the FAA to design new flight paths across multiple airports with limited input from industry stakeholders. FAA leaders now acknowledge that this was a misstep.[13] Airlines have not used many of the new paths because they did not appear to add value.[14] Instead of rushing to action, project sponsors and leaders should have engaged the airlines and other key stakeholders to gain agreement on priorities; clearly define success criteria; create a complete plan that considered the airlines' needs and constraints; conduct a thorough risk assessment; revise activities as needed; and formulate contingency plans.

Project sponsors, who are always eager to see progress, often renounce detailed project planning as frivolous and time-consuming. One project leader we interviewed recalled how a senior company executive criticized him for "including everything but the possibility of a haboob" (a word derived from an Arabic term meaning violent storm) in the project risk-management plan. However, by the end of the project, most of the 50 potential risks the project leader and team identified had been encountered and, because of the detailed planning, successfully handled. Detailed planning and anticipation of risks helped the project maintain a strong reputation throughout. At the same time, project leaders must understand that the most comprehensive risk assessment will not reveal the "unknown unknowns" that often emerge as the project unfolds.

While responding to unexpected events will always remain a key challenge for project leaders,[15] our research shows that no project can succeed without careful planning — for both the project's technical requirements and the project's reputation. Up-front collaborative planning across all aspects of the initiative can create a solid defense against the cycle of doubt because it builds stakeholder ownership and commitment, aligns priorities, clarifies expectations, results in comprehensive plans, and sensitizes stakeholders to knowable pitfalls and their solutions.

5. Communicate with integrity. Every project leader we interviewed stressed the importance of communicating with integrity and with an appropriate rhythm. The transparency of today's business environment, fueled by the instantaneous nature of digital communication, leaves the project leader and teams with no place to hide. Facilitating honest, authentic engagement, while not overwhelming stakeholders and contributors with information and updates (or starving them of information), is the best way to help individuals and groups appreciate project pitfalls, understand project progress, and, most importantly, emotionally connect with the initiative. Although this may seem obvious, we find that project leaders can be caught off guard and easily err when it comes to managing the information flow to and from project stakeholders. Our interviewees offered three general guidelines that can help project leaders avoid communication traps that can create skepticism and doubt about their initiatives.

• **Make "no surprises" part of your communication credo.** Both negative and positive surprises can lead to distrust and doubt among constituencies whose support for the project is essential. "Why

didn't they tell us sooner?" stakeholders wonder. "What else have they been hiding? If we'd known sooner, we could have adapted our plans." A project to expand chemical processes at a manufacturing plant succumbed to the cycle of doubt when the project leader misrepresented the project's status, communicating that the project was going "great" when, in reality, there were product-design flaws that compromised safety. Eventually, the problems came to light (as they usually do), and key contributors quickly distanced themselves from the project.

In contrast, another executive we interviewed recounted an enterprise-wide reorganization and downsizing project in a global manufacturing company. The executive repeatedly emphasized with his team only one theme in terms of how communication would happen: "When you carry information out or bring information in, think 'no surprises.' I will accept good and bad news just the same, but I want accurate news." This credo served the project and the organization well. Despite the obvious challenges of generating buy-in from site managers who would be involved in shuttering 15 of the company's 22 manufacturing facilities, direct and honest communications ensured that the project did not stall and maintained a positive reputation trajectory. In the end, strategic objectives were achieved on time, and the company's profits increased by 30% as a result of the plant closures.

• **Engage in dialogue.** During a project's often lengthy delivery phase, project leaders must systematically solicit stakeholder input, listen authentically, and, when possible, take appropriate action.[16] For the project leader, managing feedback from broad and often geographically far-flung constituencies can be challenging, as not every team member or stakeholder will concur on the issues that require attention or contribute with recommendations of equal value. The project leader must exercise both technical and political discretion in implementing only those changes that move the project forward and enhance its reputation, while at the same time showing respect to those whose ideas did not translate into action.

A project leader who embraces authentic listening can transform project detractors into project advocates. Team members working on an asset-reporting project at a global finance company disengaged when they became discouraged by the protracted lead times involved in implementing needed IT changes. Adding to this already difficult situation, a vocal detractor emerged from outside the team, further dampening enthusiasm and eroding what little support and momentum remained. In an effort to pull out of the cycle of doubt, the project leader listened sincerely and patiently to the detractor's concerns and, contrary to conventional wisdom, shared them directly with the eight-person core team. The resulting forum and feedback shone a light on legitimate unresolved issues, which the team discussed and addressed collectively. The process affirmed the concerns of the project detractor who, having been credited publicly for important contributions, pivoted from a negative position to that of an avid project supporter. As one interviewee observed, when the situation is managed right, "the most difficult people can become surprisingly great assets to a project."

• **Maintain a regular rhythm of communication.** Some project leaders are reticent to communicate negative information. Silence exacerbates an already challenging situation by creating an information vacuum that engenders distrust and raises questions about the integrity of the project leader and team. As one interviewee remarked, "No news is bad news." This project leader was responsible for shutting down a 400-employee, medical device plant and moving 15 product lines to other facilities. Knowing that lapses in communication would lead others to fill the void with rumors, he issued regular weekly updates. The project leader understood that if you do not manage your message, someone else will. In addition, as soon as there was an inkling of unexpected challenges — in one case, plants receiving handoffs did not have the capacity needed for them — he disseminated information quickly, before the bad news was leaked and distorted.

A steady communication tempo helps sustain stakeholder interest. At the same time, project leaders must recognize that efforts to keep stakeholders informed (even with positive news) can go overboard, resulting in "attention burnout," even among enthusiastic stakeholders. When the unanticipated departure of a powerful sponsor began to erode support and interest in a strategically vital, lean-manufacturing project at a Fortune 100 global technology company, the project leader began holding "Site Communication Days." The project leader delivered the same message about the project's importance and progress in a series of face-to-face sessions to 10 groups of 30,

using a rolling communication board and dry-erase markers. This consistent, direct communication fit the culture of the manufacturing facility and helped sustain energy and momentum for the project until a vocally supportive sponsor arrived eight months later. When the initiative crossed the finish line, it delivered on its initial objectives of significant improvements in safety, quality, and delivery.

6. Enlist both project ambassadors and high-profile supporters. The project champion is a central figure whose leadership credibility and visible support can generate consistent enthusiasm among important stakeholders. However, we also heard in our interviews that a major initiative needs a "platoon of advocates" — the right combination of people whose functional backgrounds and collective clout can reach deeply and broadly into the organization to generate and sustain the project's brand through triumphs and challenges. One project leader emphasized the importance of reaching down to the lowest levels in the organization to identify ambassadors — people who do not necessarily hold high-level titles or specific roles within the project but who are trusted and respected for their technical knowledge or leadership skills. In one-on-one conversations, this project leader sought these people's insights and explored their willingness to contribute to the project, as well as how best to leverage their involvement and support. Encouraging all team members to tap into their personal networks in soliciting ideas and support for a project can create an even larger and more influential constellation of project ambassadors.[17] The challenge here is that individual team members may not have the appropriate personal networks or the persuasive communications skills required to garner support from all key stakeholders.

Sometimes ambassadors emerge serendipitously, and project leaders need to be vigilant to leverage such opportunities. Developers in a German subsidiary of a U.S. Fortune 1000 technology company were unsuccessfully battling the cycle of doubt while working on a game-changing innovation that had significant commercial potential but flagging momentum. They were discouraged because they could not gain attention from the key players whose support would determine the project's continuity. An obscure posting about the fledgling innovation on the company's website happened to catch the attention of the company's most respected senior art director, who tried a product prototype and wrote about the experience in an internal company blog. The art director's celebrity status within the company generated much-needed attention and reenergized the project's momentum. As a result, the project's profile was immediately raised, funding was ensured, and the team was back on track. Luck saved the project, but the project leader could have sought out this sort of celebrity endorsement more directly through effective engagement and communication.

7. Revitalize the project with outside resources. We repeatedly heard from our interviewees that organizations are naturally ambitious and almost always take on too many projects, stretching their internal resources. When this happens, the project leader should consider engaging outside contractors to pick up some of the work that would otherwise be done by overcommitted team members. Doing so can generate the extra bandwidth necessary to keep the project on track while energizing team members, who can see that senior executives' commitment is real — and realistic. Although it is not always an option for projects with very tight budgets or confidential content, in many other cases, a resource infusion can help to sustain or rekindle positive project momentum.

8. Know when to change course. Some project leaders admit that, for projects with flagging momentum, they often felt compelled to stay the course, driving their projects into the ground. Stepping back, taking stock, and making changes where needed might have rescued the project. Breaking this unproductive pattern requires strong leadership: the judgment to recognize when there is little to gain from continuing along a losing path, the resilience to resurrect enthusiasm around the project's "why,"[18] and the courage to take corrective action with fresh thinking and a revised plan that reflects the project's objectives within the current realities.

A project to expand manufacturing capabilities in a Fortune 1000 company was in a steep reputation slide, and the senior business leader who sanctioned and championed the project recognized the need for a new direction. In face-to-face meetings with the project leader and key plant personnel, the senior leader emphasized that the project was a centerpiece of the company's business strategy and that its current problems could and would be solved. The

executive assembled a team to replan and rework the project's technical implementation to address the problems that had degraded its performance and its reputation. Acting like a firefighter, this executive "ran to the problem," engineered the development of a reworked recovery plan, and reversed the attitudes and behaviors of those who had drifted away from the project. Of course, in organizational climates that do not embrace problems as opportunities or believe that almost all project problems can be prevented, team members and contributors may be hesitant to voice their concerns. This compromises the project leader's ability to fully grasp current project realities and take appropriate action to revitalize an effort.[19] This caveat underscores the importance of having all project contributors communicate with integrity.

9. Have the courage to pull the plug when warranted. Sometimes a leader must accept that a project's reputation and momentum are beyond salvage. The project has spiraled so far down the cycle of doubt and performance has degraded to such an extent that the best course of action is to acknowledge defeat, capture and communicate the lessons learned, and formulate next steps to address the "why" that motivated the project in the first place. Not surprisingly, as one project leader told us, "This is probably the hardest thing for managers to do."[20] Yet, struggling on in these circumstances damages the project leader's reputation, drains team members' energy and commitment, and squanders company resources.

One project leader told a dismal tale of an experience as a team member on a once important, product-testing design project that seemed endless because of the emergence of other initiatives that were "hot priorities." In other words, other projects entered the portfolio, stole the spotlight, and siphoned away scarce resources. After six months of poorly attended team meetings and limited progress, the project leader finally terminated the initiative. Although painful, that decision freed up resources for more pressing work and demonstrated the project manager's leadership abilities and commitment to the organization.

Resist the Cycle of Doubt

Even the most technically sound and strategically important projects can be sucked into the cycle of doubt, a self-perpetuating vortex that draws energy and needed support away from a project and diminishes its status in the organization. A solid plan and strong launch are essential but do not guarantee success. Savvy project leaders recognize debilitating factors that can stall forward momentum and bring initiatives to a halt. These include unclear or changing organizational priorities, loss of support from key sponsors, problems with project delivery, and insufficient or misrepresented project messaging. They also have action plans in place to monitor and correct these forces and communication strategies to mitigate negative consequences. (See "Averting the Cycle of Doubt.")

By putting into practice the ideas and actions

AVERTING THE CYCLE OF DOUBT

Use the checklist below to assess the degree to which your project is positioned to forestall or recover from the cycle of doubt. The more items you can check, the more doubt-resistant your project is.

	Check all that apply.
A pilot offers proof of concept.	
The project is short or has been broken into phases with meaningful deliverables that demonstrate forward progress.	
Core team members are dedicated exclusively to the project and are colocated.	
Key stakeholders are involved in developing a project plan that includes a comprehensive assessment of project risks and how to prepare for them.	
Stakeholders receive frequent, timely updates that reflect the true status of project progress and outcomes.	
Throughout the project, the project leader and project team proactively and genuinely seek feedback from key stakeholders and demonstrate appropriate adjustments based on this input.	
The project leader and team cultivate and maintain the support of influential stakeholders.	
If internal resources are insufficient for the project's timing or scope, external resources have been sought to fill the gap.	
Problems are addressed head-on and are not left to fester.	

offered in this article, a project leader is in a strong position to protect and bolster a project's reputation against skepticism and doubts, sustain project momentum, and achieve important organizational objectives.

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15. For a discussion of how successful project leaders cope with the challenges of frequent unexpected events, see A. Laufer, E. Hoffman, J. Russell, and W. Cameron, "What Successful Project Managers Do," MIT Sloan Management Review 56, no. 3 (spring 2015): 43-51; and Browning and Ramasesh, "Reducing Unwelcome Surprises in Project Management."

16. Recent research on successful business-analytics projects underscores the importance of engaging stakeholders "as much as possible, as opposed to merely informing them after the fact." See S. Viaene and A. Van den Bunder, "The Secrets to Managing Business Analytics Projects," MIT Sloan Management Review 53, no. 1 (fall 2011): 65-69. This quote is from p. 67.

17. Other research affirms the value of tapping the perspective beyond the team. Doing so can "give organizations a competitive advantage when dealing with complex projects." See J. Cummings and C. Pletcher, "Why Project Networks Beat Project Teams," MIT Sloan Management Review 52, no. 3 (spring 2011): 75-80. This quote is from p. 80.

18. K.A. Brown, N.L. Hyer, and R. Ettenson, "The Question Every Project Team Should Answer," MIT Sloan Management Review 55, no. 1 (fall 2013): 49-57.

19. Laufer et al. find that "when upper management fosters an organizational climate that embraces problems as an inherent part of a project's progression, project managers are able to detect and resolve problems more successfully." See Laufer et al., "What Successful Project Managers Do," p. 49.

20. A large body of research on "escalation of commitment" has explored why decision makers are reluctant to abandon a failing course of action. For a review, see D. Sleesman, D. Conlon, G. McNamara, and J. Miles, "Cleaning Up the Big Muddy: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Determinants of Escalation of Commitment," Academy of Management Journal 55, no. 3 (June 2012): 541-562; and W. Meyer, "The Effect of Optimism Bias on the Decision to Terminate Failing Projects," Project Management Journal 45, no. 4 (August/September 2014): 7-20.

i. Brown et al., "Why Every Project Needs a Brand (and How to Create One)."

ii. Brown et al., "The Question Every Project Team Should Answer."

iii. For good discussions of the critical roles of project sponsors in project success, see T. Kloppenborg and D. Tesch, "How Executive Sponsors Influence Project Success," MIT Sloan Management Review 56, no. 3 (spring 2015): 27-30; and "Executive Sponsor Engagement: Top Driver of Project and Program Success," Project Management Institute and Boston Consulting Group, October 2014, www.pmi.org.

iv. J. Binder, "Global Project Management: Communication, Collaboration and Management Across Borders" (Farnham, U.K.: Routledge, 2007).

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