

Know When It's Time To Kill A Project

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One of the greatest sources of stress and job dissatisfaction for PMs everywhere could be attributed to being the captain of a sinking ship. The reality is, some projects shouldn't be completed. However, no one wants to kill a project that belongs to them—even if the writing is on the wall. From emotional investment to

concern of losing one's job, "killing projects" isn't typically seen as a positive result.

But what if there was more acceptance around "jumping ship" on a project? A reassurance to PMs that doing so would not be the end of their workload, but appreciated? One company has applied this methodology in order to encourage and inspire only the best, most sustainable projects. Alphabet – the parent company of Google, has a division called "X" that celebrates killing projects in their "Moonshot Factory."

At the time of one [article written](#) in 2016, more than 100 potential projects were killed off in the previous year. Guess what happened to a team of engineers who decided to abandon a project after two years? They were given a bonus. Astro Teller, responsible for this X division has previously [stated](#), "Here's some mental judo that I do with people who are new to X, to help them see that I want them to work first and hardest on the things that are most likely to torpedo their project. I say to them, 'Do we want to be the kind of people who are intellectually honest with ourselves?' They'll say, 'Yes, of course, we're going to be intellectually honest.' And then I ask them, 'Is it a good thing to find out whether a project has an Achilles heel or not?' I promise you, they say yes. And then if you ask them, 'So when do you want to know if it has a massive flaw...as soon as possible, or only after we've put in a couple of years of work?'"

Timing and Approach is Important

While Alphabet's X division is in the business of technological innovation, the same principles can be applied regardless of industry. For example, in some industries, if you're not the first to market, your company doesn't get *any* of the revenue. That's right, the first to market gets 100 percent of the revenue and everybody else gets nothing! If the competition has already gone to market with its competing product, it's smart to kill a project even if it only has two or three

months left. But no one wants to kill a project they've invested months of blood, sweat, and tears in. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be.

Sometimes the most successful project is the one you don't do. One particular client had no qualms with killing off projects. The problem was the timing. Projects being killed had typically exhausted all of the resource allocation and most of the budget and were already at or beyond the desired finish date. They needed a better system for identifying problematic projects early on; we ultimately helped them with that, resulting in significant cost savings achieved by killing those projects within just a few weeks.

Improving the ability to pull the plug on projects before too much work is invested is the goal. However, there will be times where longer projects—like the one mentioned above—will need to come to an end. It's important to recognize the hard work and engagement that has been invested, regardless of the outcome. Good project managers clearly articulate why a project is no longer needed; they reassure team members that their skills and talents are needed for projects with a greater chance for success and that their work will hopefully get repurposed in a future project, not wasted.

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