Healing a Broken Project

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Full-service digital agency.

Certified Women's Business Enterprise.

20+ years industry experience.

- Complex Projects
- Process Improvement
- Drupal + Adjacent tech
- Migrations, Media, & Multilingual
- Accessibility, SEO

We are here to help.

Who are you?

- Project Manager?
- Project Sponsor?
- Business Analyst?
- Developer?
- Play multiple roles?

Today…

I will tell you…

- New things.
- Things that you may already know.
- Things that may be hard to hear.

Remember…

- I'm looking out for your well being.
- I'm your partner in healing.
- I'm altering my bedside manner for your needs.

I'm like a doctor.

What does healing mean?

verb (used with object)

1. to make healthy, whole, or sound; restore to health; free from ailment.

2. to bring to an end or conclusion, as conflicts between people or groups, usually with the strong implication of restoring former amity; settle; reconcile:
   They tried to heal the rift between them but were unsuccessful.

3. to free from evil; cleanse; purify:
   to heal the soul.

What does broken mean?

adjective

1. having been fractured or damaged and no longer in one piece or in working order.
   "a broken arm"
   synonyms: smashed, shattered, fragmented, splintered, crushed, snapped; More

2. (of a person) having given up all hope; despairing.
   "he went to his grave a broken man"
   synonyms: defeated, beaten, subdued; More

Temporal characteristics of issues

Acute issues (severe and sudden in onset)

Chronic issues (occur over time)

Comorbidity (simultaneous multiple chronic issues)

Complications (a difficulty, a secondary issue aggravating existing issues)

How can you tell a project is broken?

Will this project ever end?

Is it done yet?
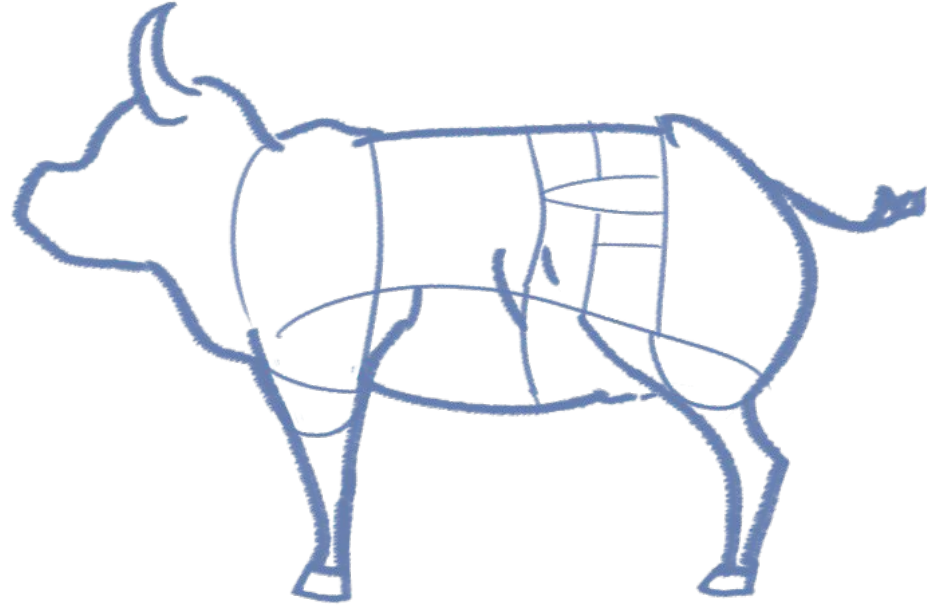
Primal analysis

Group Exercise:

Use adjectives to give a Twitter-length description of your project.

What does your gut tell you?
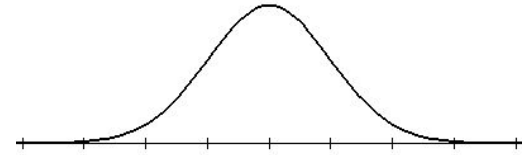
Understanding Project Anatomy

- Purpose & Goals
- Scope
- Quality
- Budget
- Schedule
- Technology
- Humans

Normal Project Pains

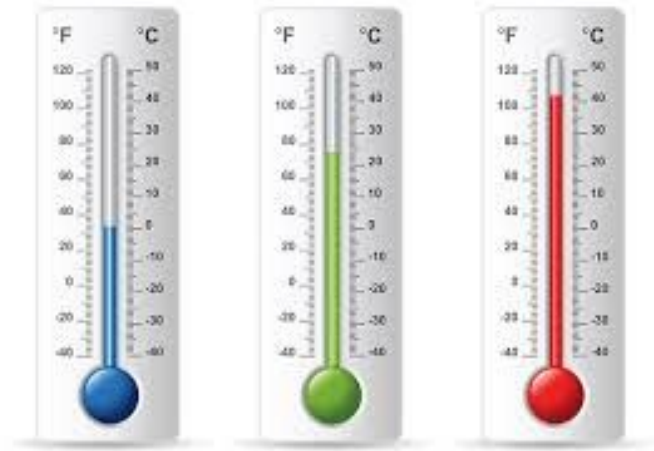**Work is called work for a reason. Put your grumble filter on.**

- Fluctuations in budget, schedule, and team
- Varying velocity based on project phase
- Calibration of quality and velocity
- Balance of real world scope vs. reaching scope

Abnormal project signs & symptoms

Take the "**temperature**" of the project. Look at data. Interview people.

- Budget overage
- Schedule overage
- Low client happiness
- Low team morale
- Things aren't getting built
- Built things aren't correct
- Unplanned impactful events

Answer the distress call

What is going on with this project?

Triage

noun

In medical use, the assignment of degrees of urgency to wounds or illnesses to decide the order of treatment of a large number of patients or casualties.

verb

To assign degrees of urgency to (wounded or ill patients).

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Triage (in our context)

What is happening **RIGHT NOW**?

What is the **FIRST** thing that should happen **NEXT**?

Should we **STOP ALL** work, **CONTINUE WITH CAUTION**, or **KEEP GOING**?

Revist Purpose

Why does the project exist?

What was the stakeholder trying to do?

Is the project's purpose **still relevant**?

Is it time for a **pivot**?

This is a big conversation with stakeholders. Sometimes the end goals get lost in the shuffle.

Review the deliverables

Many times, tasks, requirements, and priorities are set by people that were transient in the project or performed incorrect.

Some deliverables may not be relevant. This is a good time for a backlog review.

- Is anything defined?
- Is anything built?
- Are the right things built?
- Does **everyone** understand what needs to be built?
- Do "things to build" lose meaning without context? Orphaned tickets.

Analyze the people

Stakeholders:

- Expectations
- Feelings
- Needs

Project team:

- Skills
- Size
- Culture
- Behavior

Project meetings or therapy?

Diagnosis

Prepare for the hard conversation

1. Surface findings from triage.

2. Identify next steps (at high level): Full Stop, Big Changes, Small Changes

3. Identify methods used to address previous failings.

Prepare for the hard conversation

4. Define which phases of the project will need to attention and how much.

5. At this point, new estimates may not be possible.

6. Use data to support your points.

7. Use humanity to convey health.
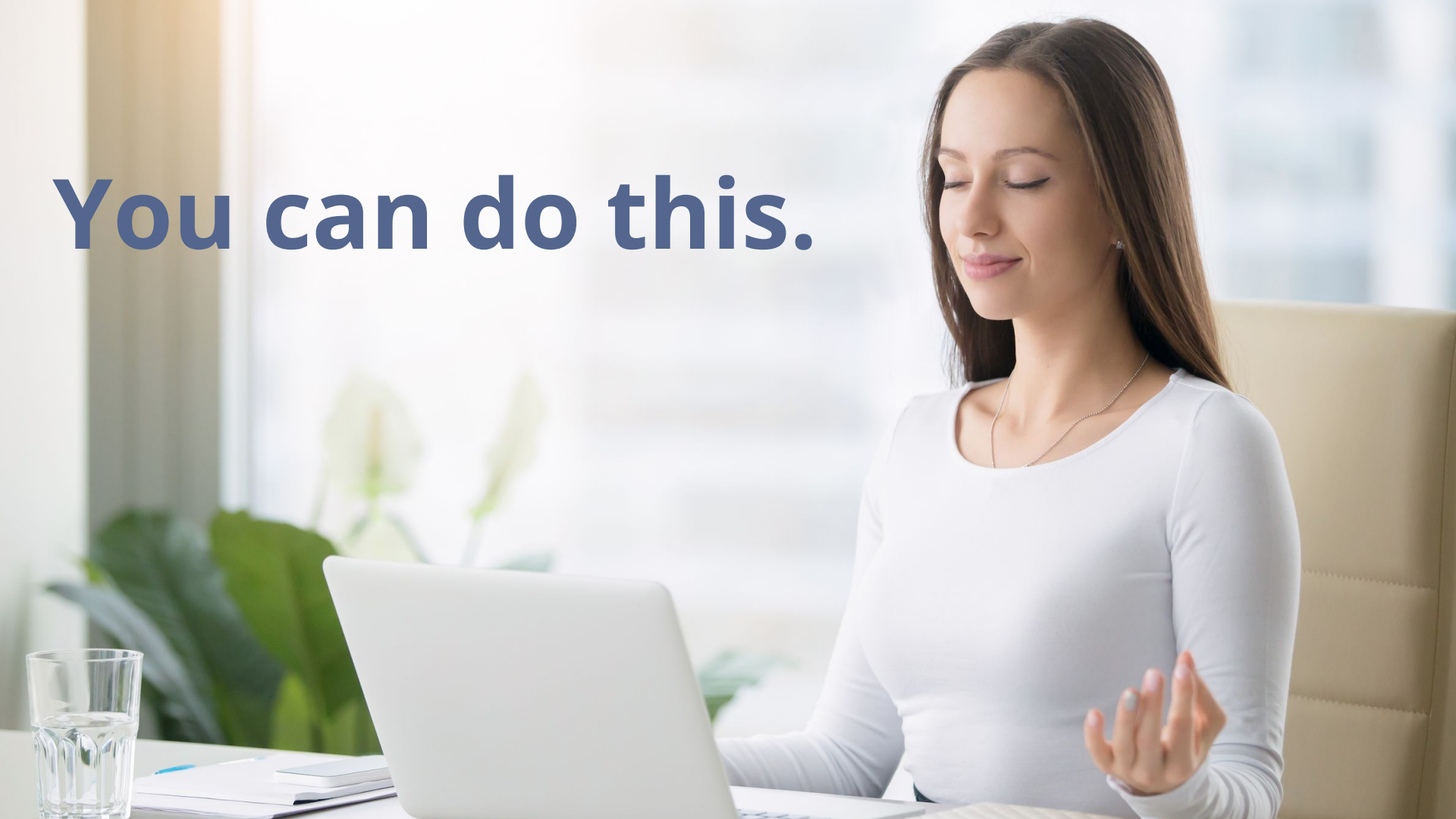
Prepare for the hard conversation

8. Understand the stakeholders to prepare the most effective method.

9. Don't cherry coat things. But be supportive and positive.

10. This is time for real, transparent change.

Improvement Goals (examples)

Establish goals that address the root cause of project failure.

- Improve client morale.
  - Identify and execute quick wins.
  - Have a supportive and consistent team.
- Improve team morale.
  - Change team members, if need be.
  - Provide proof of change.

- Establish client trust.
  - Transparency in all work.
  - Listen. Understand.
  - Suggest not tell.
- Keep development moving. Correctly.
  - Technical debt.
  - Develop defined gaps.

You can do this.

Major intervention

Start at the very beginning...

Restructure the team

- Open discussion of failures
- Transparent sharing of improvement approach
- Remove team members
- Add new folks: supporting skills, extra hands
- Provide training, if needed

Be open to feedback and ideas from your team.

The people will need to be heard.

Start out right (communication)

- Kickoff & project one-sheet
- Project schedule
- Project status reports
- Communication plan / set meetings
- Consistent and capable team
- Weekly progress reports (with budget)

Finely balanced structure must be catered to your team. Too much or too little structure are equally disruptive.

Use tools that all team members can access and understand.

Start out right (project purpose)

Help your team make the right micro-decisions without micro management.

- Define and restate business objectives.
- Identify tangible success metrics.
- Connect objectives directly with tasks and deliverables.
- Use plain English and contextual examples.

Everyone (stakeholders and team) need to be aligned.

Eye on the big picture

- Focused, process based discovery.
- Functional approach to expose gaps.
- End-to-end, as-is walkthroughs of site.
- Use workshops and time-boxed discovery.

Beware: discovery efforts can lead to more discovery!

Leverage **meeting facilitators** that can navigate a "tough room".

Record meetings for reference. It keeps people **honest** and **accountable**.

Expose risks, discuss realistic mitigations

- Team structure
- Lack of requirements
- Technology challenges
- Missing transparency
- Missing / incomplete / incorrect features
- Technical debt

Redefine deliverables

- Provide structure
- Provide more information
- Tiered delivery / progressive product features
- Perform a needs recalibration:
  - Must have
  - Should have
  - Nice to have
  - Forced
- Keep them in context.
- Use plain English and avoid jargon.

Start work.

Time passes...

Even when started correctly, the project doesn't heal.

Discussion: Causes and Responses

- No executive sponsorship / support
- No clear purpose
- No clear requirements
- Drained budget
- Schedule slippage
- Mismatched team (size, skills)
- Behavioral Issues (stakeholder / team)

Others? Any favorites?

Project health achieved

Are you taking your medicine? Exercising and eating right?

You may need to do a few waves of improvements for full recovery.

- You know what the end looks like.
- You can see the end.
- People are smiling.
- Managed time, cost, quality, and scope.
- Change is not *(as)* disruptive.

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In retrospective, an ounce of prevention is a pound of cure.

Was it worth it?

Center yourself.

Apply lessons to future projects.

Balancing Act

There will be more bumps in the road.

Determination

Benefits

Takeaways

- Keep it **simple.**
- Be **transparent**.
- **Healing is ongoing**.

Trust your project management tools.

Questions?