

## **Case study**

*Tears flowed down the sponsor's face. The health specialist said "It's time, you have to let him go". They gazed down at the patient whose brave face hid the pain and suffering he had endured over the last 24 months. Born prematurely, the patient had battled through three replans, a de-scoping, a re-org and a major technology refresh. Despite input from numerous consultants, his benefits count had dropped and his business case was no longer viable. It was only through the injection of sponsor funds that the patient had lasted this long. With a melancholy smile, the sponsor finally pulled the plug and said his goodbye before turning his back to visit the patient next door.*

## **Healthy projects?**

This edition's focus on health got us thinking about the concept of project health. The analogy to personal health is clear, and anyone who has been involved with an unhealthy project realises how difficult and unpleasant they can be.

PMOs are often called upon to review the "health" of a project. But what makes for a healthy project, and more importantly, what makes a project unhealthy? After all, projects don't become unhealthy all of a sudden. Like real life illnesses, they tend to creep up on you. Sometimes they cause a bit of pain and suffering, at other times they can be life changing.

When PMOs are asked to review the health of a project, some incorrectly focus on whether or not they conform to Project Management standards. Was the template filled out properly? Does the schedule pass all the QA checks? Was the formal gate review done? Are the reports formatted correctly? Inexperienced PMO staff stay within their comfort zone, they review the things they understand and avoid deeper, more fundamental questions.

Project Management standards are important and the lack of them may be symptoms of more fundamental problems. Unfortunately, following process doesn't necessarily mean the project is healthy. Conversely the non adherence to process won't necessarily mean the project is unhealthy. PMOs and senior project management advisors need to develop skills for assessing more fundamental questions such as:

- Is the project (Business Case) viable?
- Are the plans realistic, complete and achievable?
- Are there sufficient resources (including budget) to deliver?
- Is there Executive and Stakeholder support?
- Will the benefits be realised?

It isn't enough to say a project is unhealthy, action needs to be taken. The PMO hasn't the authority to take action, that is the role of the Steering Committee and/or Executive. What the PMO can provide is an independent view, with recommendations as to recovery or termination options. The PMO's role should be that of a health professional, not a priest reading the last rights.

Another interesting question a PMO can consider is “how healthy is the project environment?”. The project environment includes the Project Management maturity of the organisation, the systems and processes, the management culture, the commitment of people to delivery and the games they might play. A supportive and healthy environment can help Project Managers deliver, the absence of one may well doom them.