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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Assigned to a Flop? You Could Wind Up Looking Like a Winner

NOBODY LIKES WORKING on a project headed for failure. But almost everyone lands some such dreaded tasks.

A whopping 78% of 589 professionals and managers say they're now involved in at least one project they expect will fail to produce its advertised results, concludes a recent survey by VitalSmarts, a corporate-training firm in Provo, Utah. Another surprise finding: 61% say they knew an unsuccessful prior project would flop before its launch or soon after.

"When you're assigned to a project that seems bound to bomb, you are playing a high-stakes game," warns Linda Dominguez, an executive coach in Coarsegold, Calif.

Yet, you can minimize the career damage and maximize the benefits from accepting a doomed gig. "Getting involved in a high-risk, high-failure situation is a way to make a name for yourself," says Laurence J. Stybel, co-founder of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, a Boston leadership consultancy.

For starters, ask trusted associates whether you landed the assignment for punitive or positive reasons. Senior officials may "want to push you out," Ms. Dominguez observes. Or, she adds, they may "think you're the one who can make it work."

A music-industry executive assigned to co-lead a tough project is grappling with this scenario. His West Coast employer asked him and a fellow vice president to revamp their division. But before the overhaul began, the other vice president won a promotion.

HE BELIEVES her advancement over him hurt his ability to jointly direct the overhaul and was wary that "they were gunning for me." As a result, he says, the project didn't have his complete focus and could stall.

His boss, the chief financial officer, rejected his offer to abandon the shared leadership role, telling him "the project won't be successful" unless he and the new senior vice president run it together. Last month, the CFO agreed to consider making him a senior vice president in another division.

It would help to give higher-ups a well-documented explanation for why you believe your project won't succeed—along with a persuasive substitute strategy. More than 80% of individuals polled by VitalSmarts said a flop might have been salvaged, except the key decision maker was difficult to approach.

"Make sure you are crystal clear with your boss about your conclusions" without exaggerating the impact of failure, recommends Joseph Grenny, co-chairman of VitalSmarts. At the same time, "discuss the alternatives with other team members to get their feedback, buy-in and ideas" before presenting them to your superiors, suggests Stefanie Smith, a New York management consultant and executive coach.

YOUR ALTERNATE scenario should make the top brass look better. A senior project manager at a grocery chain joined an effort to automate its store-shelf tagging system. The

project, bogged down after 18 months of planning, seemed doomed. The new manager faced an impossible deadline: Roll out the new system at the chain's 120 stores within six months.

She identified 45 stores that had the most to gain from improved tagging and installed the system there six months later. "That saved face for the retail division vice president overseeing the project," she explains. He didn't object when the full rollout took a year. The electronic tags saved about \$500,000 in staff costs.

Even if you can't rescue a flawed project, it could raise your visibility and credentials. Just be confident your judgment is right, says Mike Miller, a vice president at DST Output, a printing and mailing business in El Dorado, Calif.

Mr. Miller once worked for a big telecom company that spent two years exploring expansion into local phone service. Many saw the initiative as "a death march" because the employer often didn't stay the course, he recalls. He built the software systems used for billing and other customer needs. The unit didn't meet expectations and shut down in two years. But a former colleague who had joined DST was so impressed with Mr. Miller, he recommended his company hire him. "He is now my boss," Mr. Miller says.

So, don't resign because you're frustrated over a failed project. But if you've been assigned to yet another likely flop, wonders Don Schmincke, a leadership coach in Towson, Md., "aren't you kind of wasting your time?"



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