

When to Change Your Research Plan

Plans are good until they are not. That is, if things change, then your plan must change too. Often, researchers write a plan. Things change. They blame the plan. It is not right. It is not accurate.

No.

They were right. They were accurate. It's just that things change. You now have new information. So, your plan must change too.

If you were driving from home to the shops and there was an accident along the way - what would you do? You'd have 4 choices (more perhaps):

1. Turn around and go home – Abandon the project (for now at least).
2. Wait in the traffic and pursue the same route – Doggedly believe this is THE RIGHT WAY!
3. Chose a different route – Adapt, overcome, and respond.
4. Chose a different destination and therefore a different route - Adapt, overcome, and respond.

In all cases, the plan changed in response to the situation.

1. Turn around and go home – The plan, that we needed food now, changed to no longer needing food right now.
2. Wait in the traffic and pursue the same route – The plan changed from needing food right now, to needing it as soon as possible, but without changing how.
3. Chose a different route – The plan for food immediately become more important, so we tried a different way.
4. Chose a different destination and therefore a different route – The plan for food was essential, so we looked for a different source, so we could get it as soon as possible.

All are valid options. Nothing is wrong. But they all have different outcomes. And if we translate that into our research project, we might get something that looks like this:

1. **Turn around and go home.** That's the equivalent to forgetting the goal. Or at least forget this goal at this time. It doesn't mean it cannot come up again in the future. It just isn't a goal for now. You might not change your plan; you might just move down to the next task or goal. That is, the *WHEN* changes for the goal, and perhaps the project. That's like realising you've run out of a key reagent, so you'll have to wait until it arrives to start. But, in the meantime you can write.
2. **Wait in the traffic and pursue the same route.** That'd be pursuing the goal and know it will take longer than you thought. It will require a change to the plan, as other dependent tasks will need to be shifted accordingly. Of course, you might catch-up later. But I would not goal seek¹. So, in my plans, this scenario would result in a delay to the final product. Like above, the *WHEN* changes for the goal and perhaps the project. This might be like looking in other labs for the missing reagent.

¹ Goal seek is where you adjust the process to match the outcome you're after. In this case, you might leave the final deliverable timeframe the same, but make each input activity shorter or smaller. Or even remove activities.

3. **Chose a different route.** Here, we'd pursue the goal, but select a different way to get there. If the goal were writing, and the accident was writer's block, the alternate route might be to make figures from your data. If the goal were surveying 1,000 people using survey monkey but you can't afford it, you might switch to Google Forms. Here the *HOW* changes for the goal, perhaps leaving the project unchanged. But it could have knock-on effects (e.g., need to recruit an expert in Google Sheets, changes to ethics). In our lab example, this might be looking up the same approach but using reagents and equipment you have at hand.
4. **Chose a different destination and therefore a different route.** In this case, the goal and the plan will change. Building on the survey example, above. You might not be able to recruit 1,000 respondents. So, instead you change to interviews or reduce the survey size. Or change the recruitment method. Increase the recruitment timeframe. Or reduce the number of respondents you're happy with. Here the *WHEN* and the *HOW* change. Thus, the plan changes, but you might find your overall project is unchanged. In our lab example, this would be looking up different experiments that use equipment and reagents that you have on hand.

"I really would like to thank you, Richard, for that 1-hour conversation I had with you - it gives me a lot of perspective on a career. I would also like to thank you for all the content you have put up. I do read it and forward it to my postgraduate friends"

Dr Stephanie Cheah, Lecturer

Sometimes all you need is an independent umpire. Someone who can read a room, learn about your research quickly and get to an outcome. As a Centre Director, Faculty Dean or University Vice-Chancellor, leading your team through a planning and development exercise is almost impossible. You're either too deep in the discussion – perhaps even pushing things in a very specific direction – with your team reluctant to bring you back. Or, you're avoiding making reasonable suggestions, because you don't want to be that boss.

Dr Richard Huysmans can help with annual plans, building teams or new initiatives, or refining existing activities. If you need help or advice with your strategy and planning get in touch via phone (0412 606 178), email (Richard.huysmans@drrichardhuysmans.com) or [subscribe to the newsletter](#). You can find him on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [ResearchGate](#), [Google Scholar](#), [Spotify](#), [YouTube](#), and [Medium](#).