

Six Common Reasons Why Projects Fail

General Dwight Eisenhower said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” Nobody undertakes a new initiative with the assumption it will eventually end up failing. But the reality is that far too many do because they don’t plan effectively. Consider:

- A 2022 Standish Group CHAOS Report found that only 31% of IT projects are completed on time, on budget, and with full functionality; roughly 50% are challenged, and as many 19% fail outright.ⁱ
- For business and general operational initiatives, 47% of projects fail to meet their original goals or business intent.ⁱⁱ
- 75% of organizations report experiencing project delays at least once per year, according to Gartner’s project delivery research.ⁱⁱⁱ

A comprehensive list of the reasons for project failure would be as long as a new rope. And trying to sift through such a list to determine which ones were germane to your projects would be exhausting and counterproductive. So, we’ll keep it simple and focus on six of the pitfalls common to almost every project and some fundamental things to keep in mind when organizing and executing a project.

Lack of Clear Objectives



Alice asked the Cat, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where so long as I get somewhere,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.^{iv}

This one is so obvious it is almost embarrassing to include in the list, but the fact it is so common merits it the top spot. The project sponsor is on the hook to ensure the quantifiable goals of the project are documented and communicated to stakeholders. Each of the stakeholders, in turn, should be able to clearly answer the question, “How will we know when we get there?”

- Work with the project sponsor to define and document the goal of the project and why it is important to the organization.
- Document the success criteria for the project and the quantifiable metrics on which it will be evaluated.

Undue Project Size and Complexity

“Since we’ve got the hood up to replace the battery, we might as well put in a new engine while we’re here.” Large projects have the attractive potential of yielding large benefits. But they also are almost certain to yield spectacular headaches, cost-overruns, missed deadlines, and even project failure. “Large” is a relative term and must be quantified for your organization, but trying to deliver an unnecessarily large project in one dramatic event may be worth another think. Instead, look for ways to break the initiative down into smaller manageable deliverables:



- Perhaps focus the first cycle on a single “pilot” location or group. Build upon the success of that effort by rolling out subsequent locations using an incremental approach.
- Consider implementing a subset of the larger project’s end-goal capabilities during multiple cycles, each iteration building upon the previous. Not all requirements are created equal. Critical functionality must be available on Day 1; other features can wait. These decisions drive project scope and level of effort, directly influencing complexity and probability of successful roll-out.

Fluid Requirements and Poor Change Control

When requirements seem to be etched in warm Jell-o, shifting frequently and capriciously, frustrations within the project team will escalate quickly. It is human nature for the individual defining the requirements to ask for one more thing that “shouldn’t be that big of a change”. Keep in mind Gerald Weinberg’s observation: “No difference, plus no difference, plus no difference, eventually makes a big difference.”



And because requirements WILL change, change controls need to be firmly enforced. The ripple effect of changes to requirements will manifest themselves in rework, additional work, additional software, materials, licensing, new risks, etc. All that affects the project schedule and cost. Get out in front of these challenges by:

- Defining and implementing a process for handling change requests. Review impact assessments from each team for each change. Ensure the appropriate approvals are obtained before moving forward with changes.
- Document the requests and approvals in the central project repository for future reference.

Uncertainty About Decision-Making Authority

To avoid a project team feeling like they’re trapped in the middle of the old Abbott and Costello routine, “Who’s on First?”, make it clear who is responsible for critical project decisions. This will often be multiple people, depending on the size of the project, as many projects will be diverse enough to require subject matter experts from various parts of the organization. However, even if there are multiple decision makers, there needs to be one person with the final authority to make difficult calls. This is particularly



important when a requested change may affect multiple operational areas. The absence of such a person puts the project team in a no-win situation. At the beginning of the project:

- Define, document, and communicate the name of the person with the final word on project decisions.
- If the project warrants multiple decision-makers, document those people and their areas, as well.

Conflicting Priorities



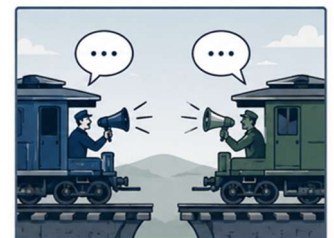
Rare is the project made up of people focused entirely on just that initiative. Most include people who are filling a project role while also working operational roles, trying to “keep the trains running” on their regular job. Unless expectations are set, one of three things is likely to happen: 1) They endure a grind of long weeks in order to do both jobs well; declining morale is sure to follow; 2) They deliver the project work but short-change the responsibilities of their “regular job” impacting the effectiveness of the organization; 3) They struggle to meet deadlines for their project deliverable because of the demands of their primary job. None of these is good for anyone.

- Work with the managers of people wearing both operational and project hats to ensure they aren’t double-booking their workday.
- Ensure the managers of these “bi-vocational” people have communicated to their people, and to the project leaders, the rules for dealing with competing operational and project priorities.

Poor Communication

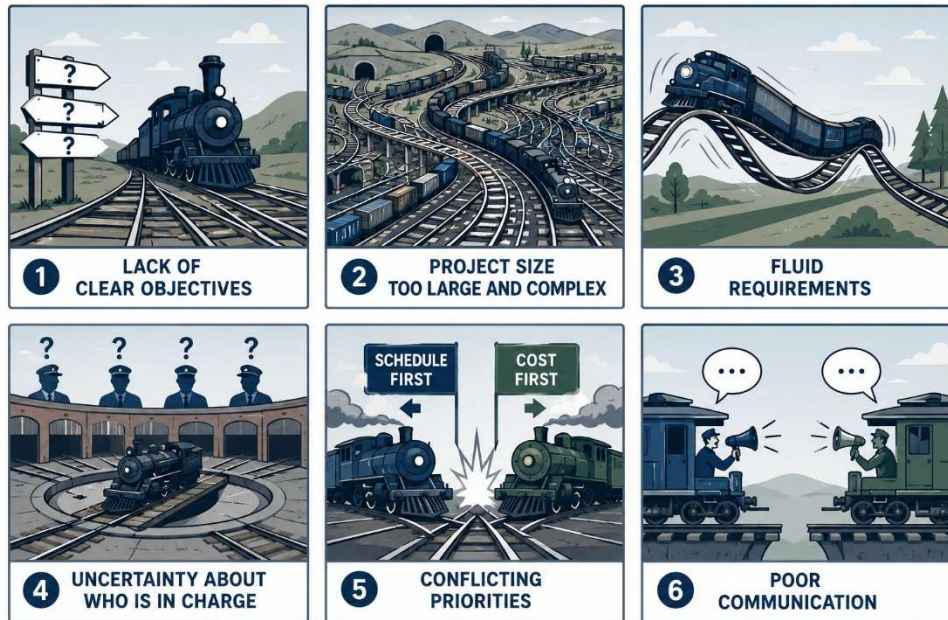
When looking for keys to delivering a successful project, the one ring to rule them all is effective communication. I once heard an instructor say that establishing and maintaining shared expectations is the most important thing a project manager can do. And central to that is clear, concise, frequent communication. Requirements will change, equipment will break down, life will happen to key resources. Communicating those things effectively in a timely manner is paramount. Entire books and college courses have been written on effective communication, so I’ll keep it simple here:

- People can deal with good news, and they can deal with bad news. What they can’t deal with is no news. Keep people informed.
- And keep in mind that bad news doesn’t improve with age. Don’t delay communicating the ugly, unpleasant facts about a project.



Summary

Delivering a successful project is hard work. There is a myriad of things to manage, and many of them can derail the project train. But if project sponsors and project managers keep in mind the overarching concepts of effective communication, clear accountability, and strict scope control, the likelihood of project success increases significantly.



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ⁱ [IT Project Failure Statistics: The 2025 Data Every Project Manager Needs to Know - Bridging Business & IT](#)
[IT Project Failure Statistics 2025: The Data Every PM Must Know · Bridging Business & IT](#)

ⁱⁱ [Project Statistics | Verified 2026 Data](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Project Failure Statistics | 2026 Market Report](#)

^{iv} Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (London: Macmillan, 1865), Chapter 6.