

THE **SIX**

CHALLENGES

EVERY PROJECT MANAGER WILL ENCOUNTER
(and how to overcome them)



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INTRODUCTION

Why do we have a spare set of keys for our cars? Have homeowner's insurance? Keep all our important documents in a safe? We KNOW challenges will occur in our lives, and we want to make sure we're prepared to tackle them.

Likewise, any project manager – whether seasoned or wrapping up your very first lessons learned – knows that **projects will run into obstacles** that need to be overcome. But, how do you prepare for them?

While there will always be unexpected issues that are difficult to avoid, many projects encounter similar challenges. Understanding the recurring themes can help you build a project challenge toolkit that you can draw on to identify, manage, and address the challenges your project is likely to face.

Here are six challenges that your next project might hit – and techniques to use to prevent them or move past them once they've happened.

“Our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change”

– Martin Luther King Jr.



Dictated – Rather than Planned – Constraints

You've been assigned as the project manager for an existing new initiative – great! You set to work on understanding the project scope and how much time, resources, and money you'll need to make the project objectives a reality. When you communicate these needs to your project sponsors, they give you exactly what you need, right? Right...

While this would lead to more successfully executed projects, project managers often find themselves working with less time, fewer resources, and less budget than they need. In fact, you will often have to work with dictated constraints rather than those that you carefully planned.

What Causes This Challenge?

Many organizations have diverse needs that pull leadership in different directions. For this reason, they may require a project be completed by a certain date to accommodate another department or have a budget reduction that leaves them with the same objectives, but less money.

External challenges can also cause constraints that are unplanned:

- A vendor discontinues support for a certain product
- A new law requires additional reporting requirements
- Recurring maintenance costs increase in price

Regardless of the reason, dictated constraints can put even the most experienced project managers in a bind.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE:

Now that you've planned your project and found that the dictated schedule, budget, or allocated resources won't work, how do you move forward?

Build a realistic plan and propose alternatives.

If you have to complete the project by a too-close deadline, propose some less critical items to be de-scoped or request additional resources to help out part-time.

If your budget isn't enough to cover expenses, determine if there are lower-cost alternatives that meet most of your needs or if the project can be divided into phases so that some of the scoped items can be completed at another time.

KEY TAKEAWAY

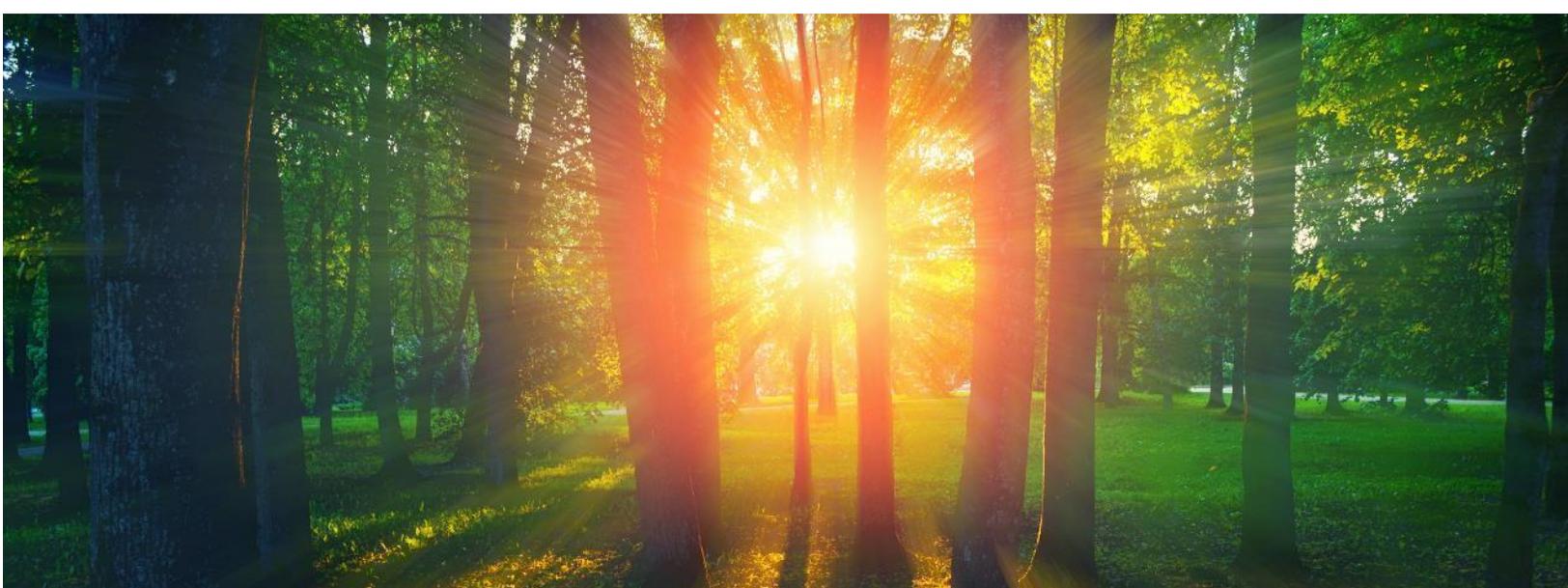
Manage expectations and be prepared to address what is and isn't feasible head-on.

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KNOWING THE PRIORITY OF YOUR PROJECT

As project managers, we're deeply invested in the activities, team members, and challenges of our projects. Because you are responsible for leading the team and championing the project objectives, the outcomes your project is trying to achieve become the focus of your professional world. But, do you know how your project is prioritized among ALL the projects in your organization?

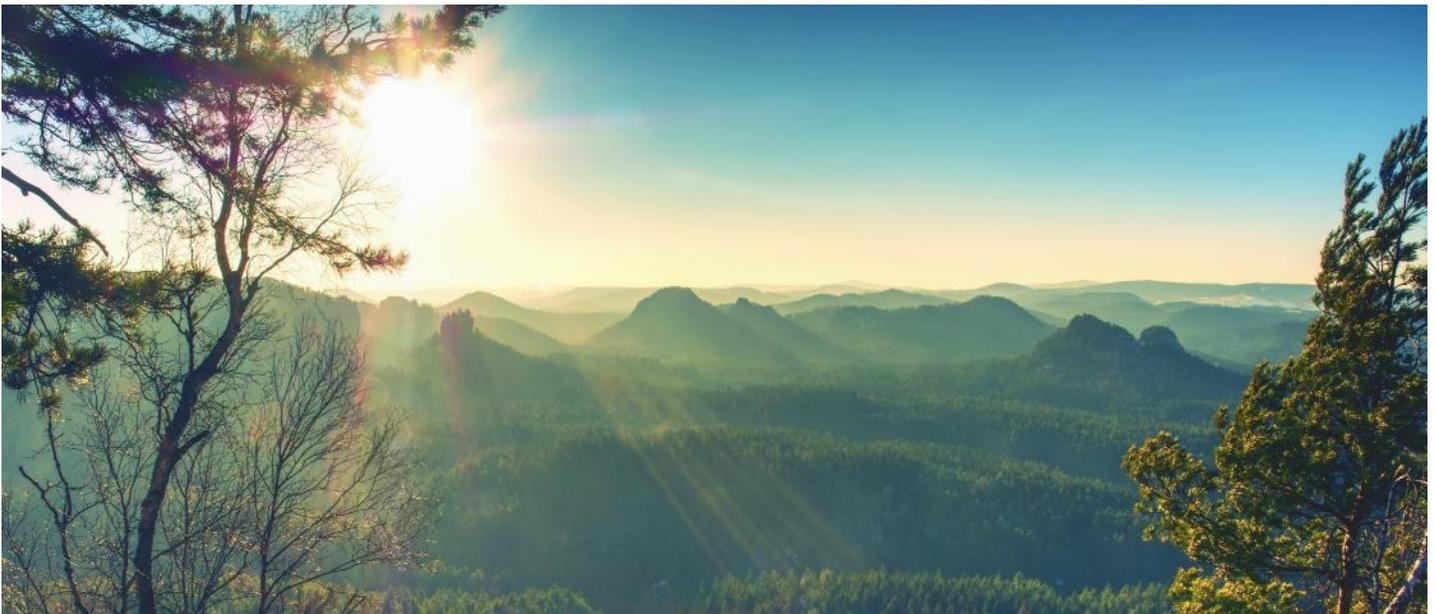
This can be a difficult vantage point to achieve as a project manager involved in the hustle and bustle, but it's an important part of ensuring your team succeeds.



WHAT CAUSES THIS CHALLENGE?

Having projects with a range of priorities is very common; many organizations have lots of balls in the air, and the priority of your project to others will impact how leadership and project stakeholders view it.

You may be utilizing more valuable resources than your project is perceived to need, and this can create resistance to their availability for completing project activities. Meetings and work sessions may not be attended by all participants or scheduled over if they are considered less important than the other items on the team's plate.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE:

How do you overcome not knowing where your project falls in importance?

ASK.

If you have a PMO in your organization, this is a great place to start learning about other projects that might compete with yours. In less formal project management organizations, other project managers or members of leadership who are involved in projects may be a good place to ask about other initiatives and their importance to the organization.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Start up a regular touch base with other project leaders to talk about goals and objectives and get feedback from leadership on which projects mean the most to them and their teams.

3

UNCLEAR PROJECT GOALS

Throughout all phases of a project, the project team is trying to meet the defined goals for the initiative. Whether you're planning the kickoff meeting, developing new functionality, or completing the last batch of testing, you are still mindful of the goals that you need to accomplish and work with them in mind.

What happens if the goals aren't clearly defined or include ambiguity? Learning how to spot unclear project goals can help to avoid misdirected work and frustration with your team.

WHAT CAUSES THIS CHALLENGE?

When projects originate, project sponsors should have a clear vision for where the organization should be at the end of the project. If there is confusion at the project leadership level due to different perspectives or motivations, it can result in goals that aren't well defined enough to point the project team in the right direction.

Long projects can also see goals shift; what was important early in a multi-year project may change due to other organizational or external factors. When the team's understanding of the goals is different than leadership's, it can be impossible to meet the expectations of sponsors and stakeholders.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE

To prevent ambiguity, level-set with project leadership early to ensure that the goals are specific and can be measured at project completion. Ask lots of questions about what the project is trying to address and why those components are important.

Once project goals have been defined, reiterate them regularly with the sponsors, stakeholders, and project team to ensure they're in the forefront of everyone's mind and any concerns or objections can be addressed.

On long projects, setting a periodic review of goals to ensure that they're still relevant can allow you to capture any changes that may have occurred and to address them proactively.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Start up a regular touch base with other project leaders to talk about goals and objectives. Get feedback from leadership on which projects mean the most to them and their teams.

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MAINTAINING TEAM MOTIVATION ON LONG PROJECTS

Long projects can be an exciting part of a project manager's career: they allow project teams to form relationships, get into a rhythm, and overcome complex challenges. They can also, however, drain team members if project managers don't place enough focus on team engagement.

When a team becomes worn down with demanding project deadlines or has been completing extra work for the project on top of their day-to-day responsibilities, even the most helpful and invested individuals can burn out.



WHAT CAUSES THIS CHALLENGE?

In so many organizations, team members within functional departments aren't exclusively dedicated to project activities. Instead, they are expected to pull double duty. This leaves them balancing their operational activities with project work and potentially working extra time to address both. Project activities can also be high-pressure, with deadlines that could result in delay if they're not met.

As team members begin to wear out, they are less productive and can impact the perception of the project both within the project team and to outside team members.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE

As the project manager, you play a huge role in helping to keep project team motivation high and ensure they are continuing to move forward.

Get feedback from the team early and often on the sorts of things that improve their project experience. Do they like to work fun activities like trivia into team meetings? Do donuts on Fridays help them to recover from a tiring week?

Seek to learn what will help keep the project positive. When your current slate of rewards or fun breaks stops working, switch it up; sometimes breaking up the monotony of a long project can be enough to keep the team moving forward towards the finish line.

KEY TAKEAWAY

As the project manager, you are responsible for maintaining momentum on your team. Take time to get to know your team members, and incorporate activities that nourish engagement.



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POOR PROJECT COMMUNICATION

Communication permeates every phase, activity, and task that occurs within a project. By far, this is one of the most critical responsibilities that a project manager engages in and facilitates. When communication paths fail within the team or to external stakeholders, projects can end up in precarious situations.

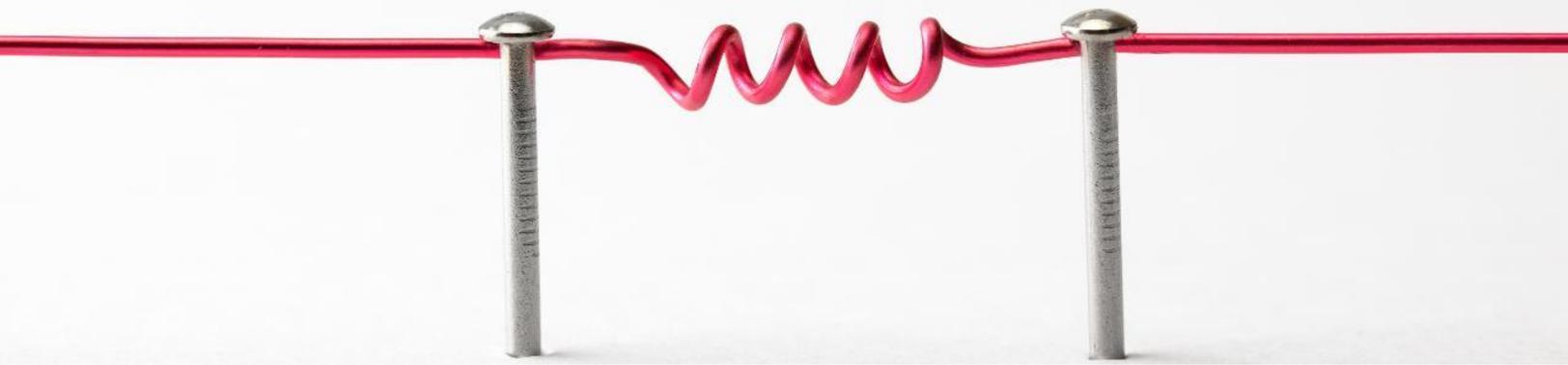
If you observe gaps or obstacles to project communication, they need to be addressed as quickly as possible to get back on track.

WHAT CAUSES THIS CHALLENGE?

Because there is so much to communicate – requirements, status updates, meeting notes, decisions, risks – it's not surprising that things may start to fall through the cracks.

- Does the team know what the current tasks and activities on their plate are?
- Do the project stakeholders have the right visibility to provide input and feedback?
- Are the project sponsors informed and able to make key project decisions?
- Do those impacted by the project know what changes to expect and how to successfully navigate the post-project environment?

When any component of communication begins to fail, its impact can be far-reaching to overall effectiveness and project success.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE

Create a communication plan that outlines all of the information that is critical to communicate and how you plan to address each subject. Regular (daily, weekly) touch bases with the project team can help to ensure they're clear on activities and the status of all project components.

Stakeholders should be asked early, and often, how often they would like to be updated on project progress. Determine the right way to get key project decisions, updates, and changes in front of your project sponsor - monthly meetings, weekly status reports, etc.

No matter what communication mechanisms you use, make sure you utilize a variety of communication types to ensure that you're effectively reaching as much of the team as possible:

- Emails
- Phone calls
- Collaboration site updates
- Team meetings

KEY TAKEAWAY

A detailed communication plan is critical to project success. Plan what you will communicate, when, and to whom, then use a variety of communication channels to ensure reach.



6

CONFLICT IN PROJECTS

To accomplish all of a project's objectives, the most important resource a project manager has is the project team. All of the planning, communication, budgeting, and scheduling works to support the efforts of the team to complete the goals you set forth.

So, what happens when the team starts to experience challenges between individuals? Resolving this problem can be vital to team morale and project success.

WHAT CAUSES THIS CHALLENGE?

Why is conflict so common among project teams? In many cases, resources come from different functional teams and work together for a short time on a project. While they have the same objectives, team members may not know a lot about the ways in which each other works or shares a common approach.

The pressure of deadlines and the need to produce deliverables can also breed conflict; teams working long hours and depending upon each other to get work done on time can create a volatile environment prone to disagreements.

When conflicts occur, teams collaborate less effectively, and project progress can slow or decrease in quality.



HOW TO OVERCOME THIS CHALLENGE

You can help to mitigate disagreements early in your project by setting conflict management norms. Set ground rules about how they should manage conflict internally so that team members can see a path forward when they disagree. If the established approaches weren't successful or were missed, encourage them to address it together in a productive, professional way.

Focus on utilizing empathy to see other perspectives and re-focus the team members on the shared goals that they have.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Conflict can cause progress to grind to a stop on even the most productive teams. Establish team norms for handling interpersonal conflict, and step in early when those norms fail.

CONCLUSION

There will always be unexpected issues that come up during projects. However, by identifying the obstacles that occur more frequently, you can build a project challenge toolkit that can help you proactively manage and even avoid the challenges your project will likely face.

Visit [Persimmon's Insights and Tools](#) for more tactics to help overcome your project challenges



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