

## What Causes Poor Project Delivery and Failure?

In order for you to become as effective and successful a project manager as possible, you must learn to avoid some of the most common pitfalls for project failure. The first step is to understand why a large percentage of projects are late, come in over budget, or fall short of delivering the products they were designed to produce. The second step is to address the underlying causes for failure so that your project has every chance of succeeding.

### Exercise: Project Failure

1. Take a step back and think about all of the different projects you have been involved in to date. Make a note of them on a separate piece of paper.
2. As a fun exercise, imagine that your mission is to sabotage these projects and to make them fail. How would you do that? Brainstorm all the things you could do (or omit doing) and put your thoughts down on paper.
3. Have you ever known someone to knowingly or unknowingly sabotage a project?
4. How many of the projects you have been involved in have not been delivered on time, on budget, or to the required quality? Why did they derail?

As the above exercise may have shown you, many factors can contribute to project failure, and often there is more than one factor at play. Here are some of the most common reasons projects fail. The list is not definitive, so feel free to add to it.

- **Lack of solid business case and strategy.** Sometimes, projects are kicked off even though the business case or business strategy is weak or incomplete or has not been fully thought through. This may be especially common on internal projects. If the business case and rationale behind your project is not robust and clear, the project will be much more prone to changes or cancellation if, for example, a new business owner joins, business priorities change, or the project turns out to require more resources than anticipated.
- **Lack of executive direction and buy-in.** The project's steering committee is responsible for executive decision-making and for providing high-level direction. This is the group to which you escalate issues that you cannot deal with on your own. If this group is not supportive of the project, does not accept ownership and responsibility, or does not allocate the necessary time and energy, your project is likely to suffer or even fail as a result.
- **Lack of end user involvement.** Users can be very busy people with regular day jobs. They are not always given sufficient time to devote to the project. Without involvement from the end users (or their representatives), requirements specification, user testing, and product quality are likely to suffer, and the user community may feel less committed to the end product. If the users are not sufficiently committed or if

they cannot clearly articulate what they want, you will have limited ways to assure the quality of your deliverables.

- **Failure to adequately identify and document requirements.** Some projects have high-level, vague, or poorly documented requirements. If design or build work is kicked off too early, without the core business requirements having been adequately identified, documented, and agreed on by the client, your project has every chance of producing the wrong product and consuming more time and money during testing and rework phases than planned.
- **Inadequate focus on QA and testing.** In order to successfully complete a project and deliver its products and benefits in line with the client's expectations, you must use a structured approach to QA and testing. Projects can and do fail if this is not done. It is not enough to trust that your team will correctly develop what the users have specified or to leave testing until the last minute. Skipping certain types of testing and going straight to user acceptance testing also can be a recipe for failure.
- **Poor planning and estimation processes.** A project that is poorly planned and estimated is risky, difficult, and can lead to project failure. Without a decent plan and estimate, resources cannot be managed and organized, risks cannot be mitigated, dates and budgets cannot be forecasted, effective reporting cannot take place, and the measures of success will be flawed from the outset.
- **Lack of success criteria.** If your project's success criteria are too vague or are not properly understood or formalized, your project is likely to fail. You simply cannot hit a target if you do not know what that target looks like and what is expected from you. The same often holds true if you have not defined what the success criteria are for each stage of your project or for go live.
- **Failure to effectively manage changes to scope.** Incorporating necessary scope changes into a project is often a prerequisite for delivering a fit-for-purpose product. Problems may arise when scope management is too informal or, on the contrary, overly formal. If scope is not controlled, changes will creep in unnoticed, and budget, schedule, and quality may be adversely affected. However, if management of scope is too rigid, there will be insufficient flexibility to accommodate requests for changes, which in turn could end up jeopardizing the quality of the end product.
- **Poor risk and issue management.** A project is often a hugely complex undertaking with lots of interdependencies, assumptions, and constraints. Circumstances change, new risks are identified, and some of them turn into issues that may prevent your project from progressing. If you are not able to effectively manage risks and issues and make decisions about how to progress when circumstances change, your project will likely suffer severe consequences.
- **Inadequate resources.** A project can fall apart quickly if the team is not sufficiently skilled or if certain key roles on the project cannot be filled due to an ineffective hiring process or limited talent in the market. In addition, team members might leave the project if they feel neglected or unappreciated, which in turn could jeopardize the execution and success of the project.

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- **Poor definition of roles and responsibilities.** If a project is to operate effectively, everyone must know not only what their own roles and responsibilities are, but also what the other players are doing—or not doing. If roles and responsibilities are unclear, people will be less effective and accountable and will become frustrated, and tasks will fall through the cracks. You will not be able to plan, communicate, and manage effectively.
- **Too long or unrealistic time scales.** When project time scales become too long, the project can lose momentum, or you can end up delivering products and services that are no longer of any benefit to the customer and organization. On the other hand, senior managers may set unrealistically short project time scales in an attempt to speed up delivery, without considering the volume of work that needs to be done. As a result, the project is delivered late, or a significant amount of features must be cut out.
- **Poor leadership and ability to focus the team.** As a project manager, your role includes an obligation to liaise with the customer, fully understand the goals and objectives of the project, set the course, and keep the team and stakeholders focused on the end deliverables. If you do not fully understand or believe in the end product, do not engage the stakeholders, or do not have sufficient experience or willingness to lead a project, you will not be able to inspire, motivate, and focus the team, and your project is likely to suffer as a result.
- **Poor or delayed decision-making.** A project can only be managed effectively if decisions are made in an informed and timely fashion. Problems can arise when you delay making a decision for fear of making the wrong one or when you rely too heavily on obtaining consensus. You may depend on the expertise of others before making a decision, but if you rely too much on decision-making by consensus, your project could fail while you wait for everyone to reach agreement. The best design or solution is often the result of analysis, not consensus.

### Questions

- Which of the above reasons for failure or warning signs are most evident on your current project?
- What would the short-term, medium-term, and long-term consequences be if nothing were done about these warning signs?
- What can you do to start addressing these potential problems and avoid the risk of failure?

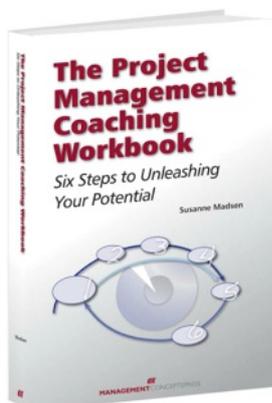
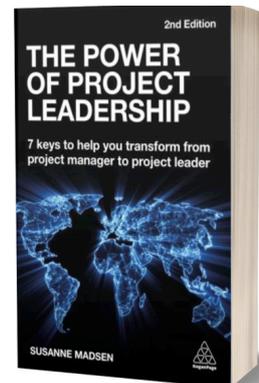


**Susanne Madsen** is an internationally recognized project leadership coach, trainer and consultant. She is the author of [The Project Management Coaching Workbook](#) (2012) and [The Power of Project Leadership](#) (2015, 2019).

Prior to setting up her own business, she worked for 17 years in the corporate sector leading large change programmes of up to \$30 million for organisations such as Standard Bank, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase. She is a fully qualified Corporate and Executive coach, an NLP Practitioner, DISC accredited and a regular contributor to the Association for Project Management (APM).

Susanne specialises in helping managers improve their leadership skills so that they can gain control of their projects and fast-track their career. combination of training, coaching, mentoring and consulting.

***"I loved this book the first time, and the revised edition is even better. Fully updated, this edition goes deep into strategies to help you lead yourself and your team more effectively. The book goes beyond theory - although you can tell the text is well-grounded in research - to give you practical tactics that you can use daily at work. When you combine powerful techniques and a willingness to do the work, you have a blend that will help you excel at delivering organisational strategy through projects. Susanne makes it easy by stepping you through the 'keys' to leadership, and you can pick and choose the approaches you think will make the most difference with your team."*** Elizabeth Harrin, The award-winning blogger behind GirlsGuideToPM.com



***The project Management Coaching Workbook – Six Steps to Unleashing Your Potential.***

*"If I were to choose ONLY two books to get my job done or do a better job as a PM then the two books I'd hold onto would be the PMBOK and Susanne's Project Management Coaching Workbook. If PMBOK is the theoretical framework, then Susanne's book is the Real World Application.. this is where the rubber hits the road. This is by far the most well written book I have read not only on the subject of Project Management but also from a Get Things Done perspective. The way she explains and assists with the GTD approach is incredible."*

—Atif Hassan, Toronto, Canada