



kintone

Why Projects Fail

& how to fix them

A Beginner's Guide to Project Management



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INTRO.

Did you know that **only 2.5% of companies successfully complete 100% of their projects?**

[This survey result](#) is troubling, but there's a silver lining. You can be in the top 3% of best-performing companies simply by completing most, if not all, of your projects.

Easier said than done right? With so many moving pieces, it can be hard to see the warning signs building up that eventually lead your project astray.

In this eBook, we'll break down the factors that cause some projects to fail and how to steer them back to safety.

CHAPTER ONE.

Unclear Project Objectives

It's unlikely you'd begin a road trip without first identifying where you want to go, mapping out your route, and creating a budget. The same logic applies when you're planning a project.

A lack of direction and unclear goals are among the largest reasons why projects fail. In its annual report, PMI Pulse of the Professional found [an estimated 37% of projects businesses undertake fail due to unclear project objectives and milestones](#). Businesses who fail to plan for projects don't just waste employee efforts and time—they also waste money. [Approximately 10% of every dollar a business spends](#) is wasted as a result of poor project management efforts.

If you work in an environment where company targets and goals are in constant flux, drawing clear lines for a project can feel daunting—and at times, futile. But in workplaces where change and chaos are an accepted part of doing business, it's more important than ever to draw lines in the sand around what a project is—and what it isn't. Creating ground in an ocean of change doesn't just stabilize you and your team—it can radically increase your odds of successfully completing a project.

So how does one get started? Here are some guidelines to effectively defining and communicating objectives with your team:



In its annual report, PMI Pulse of the Professional found an estimated 37% of projects businesses undertake fail due to unclear project objectives and milestones.

Understand the difference between goals and objectives

Although “goals” and “objectives” can be used interchangeably, it’s important to point out some key differences.

According to a Forbes article, [a goal is a broad primary outcome, or the “destination.”](#) An objective, on the other hand, is a measurable step you take to achieve a strategy. Think of objectives as the project’s “road map” with specific tasks that need to be completed to reach the goal.

Objectives are imperative to project success, especially in companies with shifting priorities. Here are two key reasons why:

1

They de-stress your team and increase productivity. One of the primary reasons people procrastinate on a project is because they see the forest instead of the trees. Instead of seeing what single step they have to take next, they see all the steps they have to take in one glance—and the thought of that can be overwhelming and debilitating.

Clear objectives don’t just break projects down into actionable chunks, they give your team a greater sense of control and clarity over their work. Instead of being overwhelmed by the number of steps it takes to reach the end, they just need to focus on the step in front of them.

2

Objectives, especially when grouped together in project phases, allow for natural review periods. When one phase is finished, you can review a project to make sure it's still aligned with initial project goals, scope, budget, etc. This is also a great time to reassess a project and make adjustments if company priorities do shift and the project does in fact need to change.

It's much easier to change a project—and keep control over the change—if there are many built-in phases to review and adjust before the project gets too far along. Otherwise your project may succumb to the sunk cost fallacy.

Now that you know you need to have both goals and objectives to successfully complete a project, it's time to learn how to identify them. You can do this by asking yourself some key questions:

Ask the right questions

WHY?

Why are we considering this project?
Why is this project important to the organization?

WHAT?

What problems is the project expected to solve?
What are the real issues at the core of the project?
What deliverables do stakeholders expect from this project?

WHO?

Who will be involved in this project?
Who has a stake in the outcome?

HOW?

How do various stakeholders goals differ?
How are we going to measure success?
How are these objectives aligned to our overall business strategy?



Try to get ahead of assumptions or miscommunication

Remove assumptions about a project by communicating objectives early on. If you want a project to succeed, you need to make sure ideas of “success” are aligned between management, the team, and stakeholders early on. These conversations can be difficult, but if they’re not tackled early on, they’ll cause trouble later. You and your team will likely feel less receptive to outside feedback if you get it after the work’s been done rather than before.

When it comes to miscommunication, the easiest-to-implement solution is to make sure team members are in project-related meetings whenever possible (even if it’s just to listen), as well as have uninterrupted access to the information from meetings they don’t attend.

The Communication Game-Changer

Meeting minutes are a simple but effective solution to making sure things don’t get lost in translation. Get into the habit of taking detailed meeting minutes for every meeting (and recordings for business-critical ones) and storing them somewhere public and accessible for your team to refer back to later on.



For example, if you have a conversation with your company's executives about a project's goals, making the conversation, either via notes or recording, accessible later to your team allows them to understand the various goals, concerns, and objects of the company. **They'll have better context for their work**—which will not just empower them, but also allow them to make more strategic decisions when circumstances change.

Map out a chain of communication

Create a communication system that team members can use to update stakeholders and management on where a project is heading and when changes are made. Avoid surprises by developing a system that creates accountability at every step of the project.

Establishing rules for project collaboration and discussion doesn't just help improve communication and set expectations for everyone on the team, it also helps establish data management and collaboration habits that reduce future opportunities for conflict and confusion. Everyone knows what's expected of them on any given project or process.

Here's how to start this process:

1

IDENTIFY what tools will be used for data management and collaboration.

Where do you want your data to live? What platforms can they use and who has access to them? It's imperative to make sure you know where all your information on a project exists, and who has control over it or access to it.

2

SELECT which channels your team communicate on and where specific types of conversation/discussions live.

Does feedback on an Excel doc get delivered via email or Slack? Can it be sent privately or should certain members of the team always be included in these updates, even if they aren't responsible for taking action on them?

Conversations about the project offer context that can be just as important as the data itself, so creating intentional spaces for discussion is a key step.



Establish clear deadlines and roles

A Gallup report found only 33% of people know what is expected of them from their jobs. This lack of clarity is a major contributor to project struggles and failure. How can teams be expected to finish tasks if they aren't sure the work is theirs?

The way to counter this is by creating clear objectives, along with who they're assigned to, the scope of the work, and a deadline, in a place where all members of the team can see and agree to it. A task assignment doesn't mean much if there's no one else on the project who knows about it.



Final Thoughts

It's tempting to dive into a project the second it's your responsibility, especially if your company is fast-paced, demanding, and needs results NOW. But skipping over the outlining phase of project management only yields frustration and a higher chance of failure. Take a breath and take time to establish project objectives and goals so you and your team feel a greater sense of control over your project—and have a greater chance at success.

CHAPTER TWO.

Poor Progress Tracking & Management

Like anything with a lot of moving pieces, success or failure often depends on the changes that happen along the way. Projects are no exception.

Successful project management should efficiently track changes to keep everyone on your team accountable as well as keep an audit trail for stakeholders.

But project tracking is more than just establishing checkpoints and milestones—it's creating a full-fledged system for monitoring their completion, reporting truthfully on whether or not they were successfully completed, and if any problems were encountered.

With a good tracking system in place, it's nearly impossible to let unfinished tasks or missed deadlines slip through the cracks unnoticed. However, when you're missing an adequate tracking management system, the following can happen:

No way to measure a project's progress

How will you, your team, and management know when a project is going well or when it's gone south?

Project managers are often challenged by determining whether or not a project is successful, especially since those involved may have different perspectives on what successful completion looks like.



“Only 23% of organizations use standardized project management practices across the entire organization.”

- Project Management Institute (PMI)

Here are some specific ways for measuring progress:

- 1 “Earned Value” management:** This is a technique to monitor the project plan, actual work and work completed value to see if a project is on track. Earned Value shows how much of the budget and time should have been spent right alongside the amount of work done so far.
- 2 Milestones:** Milestones can be any significant checkpoint or phrase in the project lifecycle. They can also be any highly significant task, event, or decision for a given amount of work.
- 3 Status reports:** Status reports, whether they’re weekly or monthly, help managers to observe tasks and their progress. They can help track whether the project’s initial goals can still be met after a certain period of time, or if adjustments need to be made as a result of changing circumstances. They are also helpful for reviewing a team’s performance and enable managers to quickly step in when a problem comes up.
- 4 Data integration with software:** As projects grow in size and complexity, tracking the progress of potentially hundreds of stakeholders can be cumbersome. This is where the software tools in place become critical.

Good project management software can let you automate your project tracking to request approvals, notify stakeholders when changes occur, and give your teams real-time status updates. At the same time, a good project management software tool should give you real-time analytics from any mobile device, so you can see the status of your project or any given task related to it at any time.

Project goes over budget and time

With poor tracking in place, it becomes difficult to know when you need to reallocate resources or immediately fix problems, which can invariably lead to a project going over budget or missing crucial deadlines.

With fewer than a third of all projects successfully completed on time and on budget, this is a huge problem for many project managers. It usually ties back to setting milestones to achieve the desired end date. Not taking milestones seriously can drag projects out which can cause you to lose momentum and waste time catching up.

Overwhelmed and burned out teams

You may find that completing a milestone is going to be more challenging than originally anticipated. Maybe it's more expensive than original estimates, or requires more "hands on deck" than initially anticipated. Whatever problem you identify, tracking helps to get an immediate snapshot of the status of your whole team so you can make adjustments.

Tracking is also useful to make sure you're not over-assigning tasks to people on your team feeling overwhelmed. And it makes it easy to know when a milestone has been completed.

Scope creep

It's not unlikely for management, clients, or even vendors to add more requirements even with your project well underway. You may be happy to please them, but without a project tracking system, you might not realize that some or all of their added expectations are unrealistic. A 2017 PMI report found that nearly 50% of business projects experience scope creep.

With a tracking system, you should be able to tell them what is and isn't reasonable, and if they're adamant, what in your project would have to be shifted to meet their needs.



Overall, 39% of employees felt their organization suffered from broken document management processes.

Software automation tools can solve this by keeping all your documents in one centralized location that's easily searchable and attached to a specific checkpoint or milestone.

Unorganized slew of spreadsheets and emails

Effective project management tracking really comes down to staying organized. There's always an endless stream of spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations and other project documents to keep track of, and it doesn't take much time before your desktop and inbox get cluttered.

It's easy to get lost in data overload. [A comprehensive look at the problem of lost information by Xenit](#), a Belgian-based IT company, noted that “[In 2012], [McKinsey reported](#) that **‘employees spend 1.8 hours every day—9.3 hours per week, on average—searching and gathering information.’”**

Their review found that six years after the McKinsey report, the issue still hadn't gone away: A study by Nintex showed that 49% of 1,000 employees surveyed said they struggled to locate documents related to their work. Some 43% also struggled with issues of document sharing and document approval requests.



Final Thoughts

Good intentions can turn sour fast if unexpected surprises create a bottleneck or issue of accountability in the middle of a project. Before you and your team hit the ground running, spend time to construct a tracking system to help you better manage people, equipment, time, and money to successfully complete your project.

CHAPTER THREE.

Ignoring the Need for Change Management

Change is happening every day, if not every moment, at your organization. New projects are constantly in motion to increase profits and improve your competitive advantage. People leave the company, and new people join. Old processes are revamped and made more efficient.

Especially in cases of large-scale projects or big organizational change, ideally there is a strategic change management plan to help facilitate each step. Proper communication about the context behind the change (why is this change being made?) as well as clear expectations of all parties involved (who needs to complete what actions by when?) are key parts of this plan and will get your team aligned and prepared.

Yet managing these changes tends to be placed on the back burner for many organizations. It's something that would be "nice to have," but not a priority. At the end of the day, that mentality can have a real impact on your business' bottom line.

Data shows that implementing change management strategies can enable organizations to successfully complete more projects.

Projects that Met or Exceeded Objectives



Prosci, an independent research company in the field of change management, gathered data over ten years and found that initiatives with excellent change management are six times more likely to meet objectives than those with poor change management.

Even a subtle difference between “poor” and “fair” increases the likelihood of meeting project objectives by three-fold. There’s more research to back up those claims.

[McKinsey](#) estimates that **70% of large-scale corporate change programs end in failure**, largely due to a lack of change-management infrastructure, proper oversight, and regular performance check-ins to track progress.

Despite this clear data, many companies still spend a considerable amount of time and money training people in project management methodologies and tools, but rarely invest the same for change management.

As a result, many of the risks are overlooked and lead to project delays or all together failures.

Incorporating change management best practices can mitigate the risks of project failure or delay. But before we dive into ways to incorporate these practices, let’s define the key differences between project management and change management.

Project management is the organization and management of resources built around events and timelines that ensure an organization completes a project defined by time, budget, quality standards and scope. It’s a method for getting projects done.

Change management is about implementation. It focuses on company culture and people to help an organization achieve the benefits expected from the project. It enables transition from one stage to another.

Project management and change management both aim to increase the likelihood that projects or initiatives deliver the intended results and outcomes. Although each discipline can function independently, [Prosci says](#) the most effective approach is to integrate change management and project management to create a unified approach to implementing change.

Here are some ways you can bring change management to both your projects and organization:

Try some change management exercises with your team

Effective change management helps leaders anticipate people's negative reaction to change. It's human nature for people to react to change with fear and anxiety. These exercises can help your team understand and learn how to manage change:

The blog "Change" [listed seven engaging exercises](#) you can try with your team. Among them is the "The 4 P's Exercise." In this group exercise, you divide a large sheet of paper into four columns, one for each of the P's. Then go through each project and identify:

PROJECT

What are the upcoming changes?

PURPOSE

What benefits will the change bring? Will it increase revenue? Will it make processes more efficient?

PARTICULARS

What will need to change? List out the details. If the project is implementing a new CRM system, one particular might be training to use the new system.

PEOPLE

Which employees will need to change the way they do things or actively participate in the change?

View more change management exercises on the [Change blog](#).



Traditional project manager methodologies typically offer little guidance in how to motivate people or compassionately address a team member's fears and doubts over new projects and how they will affect their jobs in the future.

Find project managers with good interpersonal skills

The reason for a lot of project management failure is traced back to a lack of people skills, and understandably so. It can be challenging for many task-oriented project managers worried about timelines and budgets to focus on building strong interpersonal relationships.

Finding project managers that are good at listening and understanding people helps prevent the unanticipated people-risks that could take a project off track. And at the end of the day, who doesn't want to build rapport with people working toward a common goal?

Get stakeholder and organizational support

One of the top reasons for resistance to change by employees and managers is due to a lack of leadership commitment.



Project managers need to show leaders the value of a structured approach to change management. That can be difficult if change management is seen as secondary and not a needed aspect of a project, especially if it costs money and resources.

Project managers have better luck showing the value of change management methodology when it's framed around the benefit to the bottom line, ROI targets, and creating a compliant workforce.

A good change management plan implementation also regularly reports back on progress through relevant metrics and milestones. Measuring and communicating this impact throughout your project builds support and reinforces accountability.



Final Thoughts

Integrating change management with project management is vital to ensure successful project completion and implementation, but it requires a commitment from everyone on the team. It could be a rocky start, but with practice and persistence, your organization can break free from the cycle of high-levels of project failure with a people-focused approach to project management.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Weak Communication



“Ineffective communications is the primary contributor to project failure one third of the time, and had a negative impact on project success more than half the time.”

- Project Management Institute

You're probably already aware of the fact that poor communication is a notorious project killer. But good communication isn't just about timeliness and tone; it's about where it's happening. **We live in an age where we aren't confined to only a few select channels:** we have email, text, Slack, Zoom, Skype, phone calls, in-person, and a myriad of other options before us to chat with our colleagues.

Often, we use a mixture of these tools to communicate depending on the urgency and importance of our needs. But the problem comes when we need to recall or depend on our communication (past and present) to successfully execute projects.

How can a project move forward seamlessly if an important conversation was held over a private Slack channel but the information related to it is shared via an email chain?

You're probably not surprised to hear that the Project Management Institute report labeled poor communication as one of the primary factors in project failure. The question remains, though: **with this level of awareness, why does it continue to ruin projects day after day?**

Established but not always effective channels

Most offices have an official set of tools they rely on for communication, whether they're effective or not. For example, most companies utilize some sort of email platform to manage their collaboration, **even though email often contributes to communication silos by limiting the number of people who have access/visibility on a given chain.** CC and BCC are only good if the person sending the email remembers to hit them and REPLY ALL on every subsequent response. How many times have we made the mistake in a rush and sent the wrong response, effectively closing the door on a conversation to someone who needed access?

Shadow IT communication tools

For the uninitiated, shadow IT tools are platforms or applications that are not officially approved for use by a business but are used nonetheless by team members for communication. For example, the sales department might run a private Slack channel for their team while Marketing relies on Google Hangouts to chat with each other.

These private channels might seem valuable because they shorten time delays and everyone in the know knows the rules of using them. But the problem is just that: everyone in the know. Which, often, isn't many people.

What is Shadow IT Costing You?

While Shadow IT may help solve immediate problems, like the need for real-time messaging, it also comes with a higher risk of security and compliance complications because the tools are not properly vetted. ***The Everest Group* found that *Shadow IT takes up an astounding 50% or more of overall IT spending for large enterprises.***





Information shared between a team on one of their smaller channels might be valuable to another team, but how can that information be shared without copy/pasting into another channel?

These communication silos also set teams up so that they only share information with those they think need it—not recognizing that the information they have may be valuable to others who aren't top of mind. **An insight from sales can help marketing fine tune their upcoming project—but not if they don't see it.**

A lack of centralization

One of the biggest challenges teams face with effective communication is a lack of centralization. Conversations that happen over multiple channels can be difficult to effectively track (especially for busy members who don't have time to pick and search through each channel for information), meaning delays in data sharing, missed points for collaboration, and delays in understanding what challenges members are facing to get their work done.

Another challenge is repeat conversations: **someone who wasn't privy to an earlier conversation between two people sends an email asking their colleagues the same question that was answered somewhere else.** Not because they want to waste time, but because the earlier conversation happened somewhere they couldn't see (such as an email chain or a private Slack channel).

These kinds of delays can breed a sense of unreliability and lead to greater breakdowns in trust between team members, especially if channel changing gets in the way of accountability and action-planning.

What's a team to do?

For teams facing an office environment with multiple channels, there are a few actions to help minimize the miscommunication:

1

Get overly organized

Organize all your interactions. Simple actions, such as organized agendas, meeting minutes, and action items are incredibly valuable and should be highly documented. Decide not only what information you're going to track, but who is in charge of tracking it, how it will be tracked, and where that information will be stored. **It's imperative that members of your team can continually access the documents you create even after the meetings are over** so they have the ability to work off them as they move forward with their tasks.

By having past and in-progress conversations available, you can not only help members stay on track but also avoid repeat conversations (they don't have to ask others) about where the information/chart/progress is on something.

It can be tempting to let simple actions slip because they can feel like extra work, but in reality, keeping good notes and checking off completed tasks takes very little time. Meanwhile the reward is a digest of your team's success as well as a clear picture of where each piece of the project actually stands.

2 ID which communication channel is used for what

Ideally you can streamline your communication channels into one centralized platform so you don't have to search for which conversation happened where. But sometimes it's hard to make that transition—or it takes time.

In the meantime, create clear policies for your communication channels about what gets shared where.

Maybe Slack is only for general chat, such as asking a coworker what their thoughts on a piece of industry news is, or how their weekend went, while email is for any conversations related to documents or a specific project.

3 More access is better for everyone

Your team, your department, and your company can make better decisions the more information they have to consider.

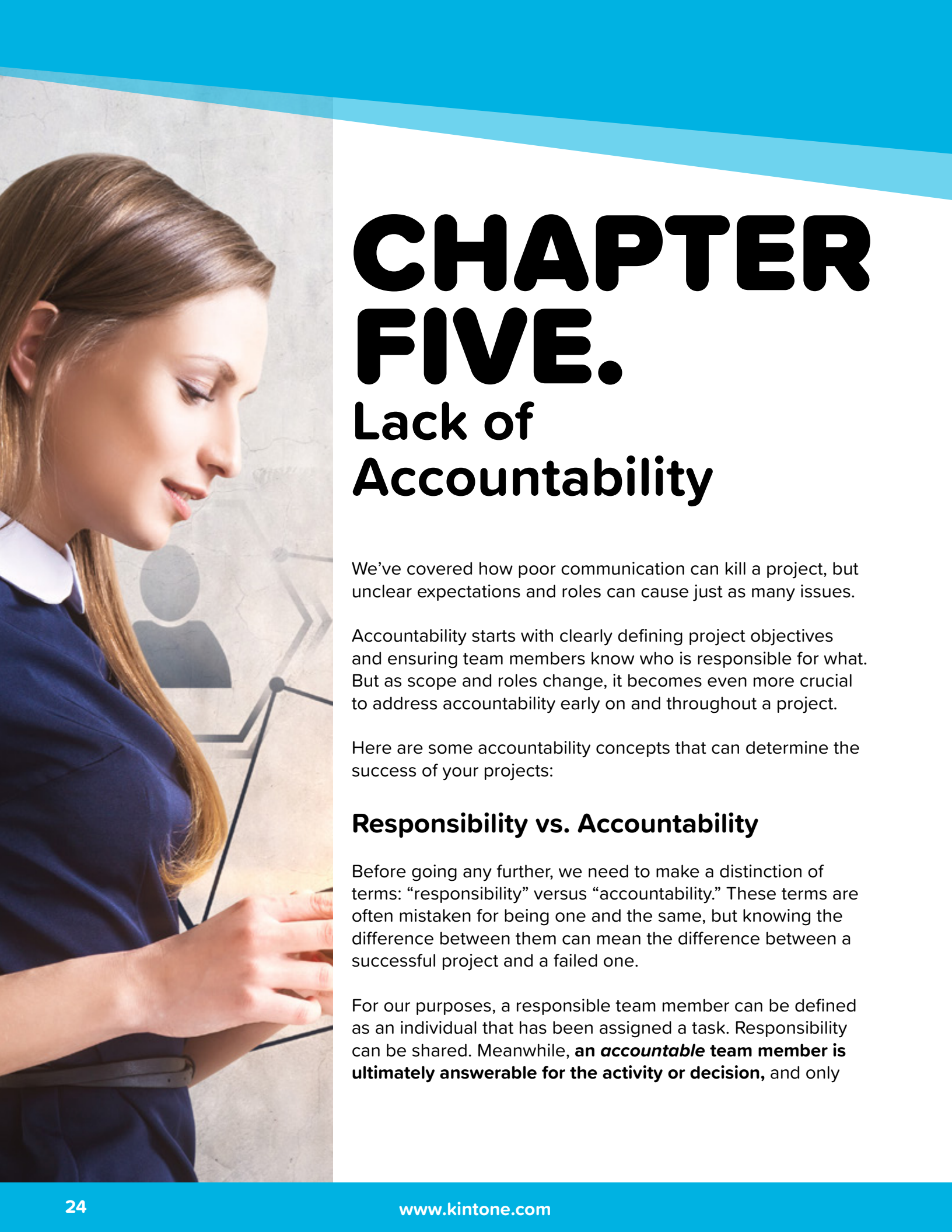
Curate your channels and your conversations in mind with who else may benefit from them. Create policies where your team and others can have access to them so they can build on that information to make better choices for their own projects.

By prioritizing accessibility we can begin to break down the communication silos that keep our teams and departments from successfully collaborating on complex campaigns or other projects. It also helps managers and directors to understand and foresee where their team needs help or what potential pitfalls they might face. Successful projects often require extensive team involvement, so planning ahead for it helps keep things streamlined (and everyone accountable) early on.



Final Thoughts

Don't let poor communication be the reason your project failed. Instead, pay careful attention to the channels you use to communicate, to the guidelines and best practices you set up for your communication, and to the communication you have not just with those you talk to, but with those you don't. Good communication is not just a cornerstone of good project management; it also brings about other benefits in terms of your continued relationships with your project team and other departments.



CHAPTER FIVE.

Lack of Accountability

We've covered how poor communication can kill a project, but unclear expectations and roles can cause just as many issues.

Accountability starts with clearly defining project objectives and ensuring team members know who is responsible for what. But as scope and roles change, it becomes even more crucial to address accountability early on and throughout a project.

Here are some accountability concepts that can determine the success of your projects:

Responsibility vs. Accountability

Before going any further, we need to make a distinction of terms: "responsibility" versus "accountability." These terms are often mistaken for being one and the same, but knowing the difference between them can mean the difference between a successful project and a failed one.

For our purposes, a responsible team member can be defined as an individual that has been assigned a task. Responsibility can be shared. Meanwhile, **an accountable team member is ultimately answerable for the activity or decision**, and only

one accountable person can be assigned to an action. This is an important distinction because people with responsibility to complete tasks are quite often not the ones accountable for the overall success of those tasks.

Oftentimes, a project manager will depend on a number of large and disparate teams to complete tasks at particular deadlines. Unfortunately, responsibility and accountability are not always linked. In those cases, team members with a lot of responsibility, but not much accountability might step aside and let the hammer fall elsewhere.

This is not to say that those team members are stepping aside out of laziness or maliciousness. Very frequently it comes down to the fact that team members have a multitude of responsibilities competing for their time.

The problem is that if enough people step aside, the gap becomes real, the project objective falls through, and the blame game begins.

To build accountability before work on the project even begins, it's important to not only be clear on tasks and who they're assigned to, but also the context of how the overall project ties to larger team goals. Accountability also means there should be check-ins to assess progress and performance. Acknowledging successes and areas that could use improvement are a key way to keep your team accountable and build a culture of continuous improvement.

If you are a project manager, make sure to not only define responsibilities but also understand the structure of accountability within the project. **Always ask yourself upfront, “Is there someone accountable for this task in the project?”** If the answer isn't yes, then for all intents and purposes it is you until you address that gap.



However, for the sake of accountability, make sure that called out tasks will have a proper owner who will be the one to report on the status of that task going forward. If “let’s” and “we’ll” slip through without agreement on who the owner is, the project will be set up so that the team is responsible, but no one is accountable should it fall through.

It is important to note that this is not intended to be a tool for issuing blame. In fact it is meant to serve as a tactic for avoiding blame that might come from misunderstandings later on about who was to take on the task.



Final Thoughts

In an ideal world, each project is like a cheer routine where a team of cheerleaders hoists up one member into the air and catches them on their way down. Every team member is invested because they have a relationship with the falling cheerleader and their success depends on their collective effort in bringing their fellow down safely. If you can bring about that same investment and motivation in your project team, you will have the best chance of success. day to perform tasks they dread more than doing their dishes or paying bills, the results will be astounding.

CHAPTER SIX.

Unreliable Estimates

Cost estimation, typically filled with uncertainty, can be one of the most tedious steps to get a project off the ground. But it's a job you don't want to skimp on. Unreliable estimates, whether for cost, scope or time, are among the largest reasons why projects don't deliver their objectives.

We've all heard of projects that end up going way over their original estimates. It's a huge source of frustration for stakeholders and project managers alike. It can harm your company's credibility or even create a sense of distrust among management and project leaders.

The first step for successful cost estimating is finding the right person to take on the responsibility. Like with anything, experience matters. Less experienced planners tend to be overly optimistic and assume that everything will go right. More experienced managers, on the other hand, lean toward thinking everything will go wrong and build in a buffer.

Regardless, project managers typically follow a few tried and true methods to try and create the most reliable estimates.

Here are three common methods used:

1

Parametric Estimation

This is one of simplest methods that estimates projects on a quantitative basis, such as dollars per square feet or number of installations per day. But not everything can be quantified, which leaves some gaping holes in your estimation.



When calculating cost and time estimates for a deliverable, a [three-point estimation formula](#) where each team member provides their pessimistic, optimistic and best-guess estimates will help achieve the most accurate results.

2 Analogous Estimation

This method is based on historical information of past projects. It's generally used early on when much is not known about a project. Analogous estimations will use time or cost in similar projects to create a new estimation. It's a quick and relatively easy method of estimating, although not the most accurate.

3 Bottom-up Estimation

This is the most accurate, but also the most time-consuming form of estimating since it requires breaking down each project task into smaller components, such as individual deliverables. The estimates for the smaller chunks are combined to create a larger estimate for the entire project as a whole.

In this type of estimation process, the first step is to create a [work package that outlines the scope and major deliverables](#) that each team member will produce as well as costs, duration and potential risks.



Final Thoughts

The smaller you can break down the scope of your program, the more accurate of an estimate you're going to churn out. It's also important to not just stick with one method, but use a couple to make sure you come out with the most definitive estimation in the end.

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