WIKIFREE

THE BETTER PRACTICE NOTEBOOK 49

25 Common Project Management Mistakes and How to Avoid Them



wikifree.com

Spot the pattern before it spreads

Most project mistakes become easier to correct when the early signal is visible.

Use this guide

Each numbered page names a mistake, shows a warning sign, suggests a better response and identifies evidence that the correction is working. Adapt the response to the project's context.

The running setting

Examples follow a fictional Service Desk Upgrade: a team changes the request process, configures a tool, trains operators and hands the service to an operating owner.

Create a learning response

Use the mistakes to improve the work system and decisions. Ask how the condition arose and what would prevent repetition rather than treating the list as a way to assign blame.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose one recurring project frustration and look for its earliest observable signal.

01 / Starting without a clear purpose

A delivery activity is easier to justify than an untested outcome.

Warning sign

The team says the project is to install a new tool, but nobody can explain which service problem should improve. Features multiply because every request appears equally relevant.

Better move

Confirm the business need, affected users, intended outcome, measure and benefit owner. Test whether the proposed tool is a credible way to address that need.

Owner and evidence

The sponsor confirms the purpose; the operating owner defines the outcome measure. A short agreed statement guides scope decisions and later benefit review.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask which result would make the project worth doing.

02 / Leaving authority ambiguous

Coordination alone does not establish who may approve a commitment.

Warning sign

The project manager promises a launch date while the sponsor assumes operations must approve it. Later, each believes the other has accepted the readiness risk.

Better move

Record who approves scope, funding, changes, acceptance and release. State delegated limits and the route for decisions outside them.

Owner and evidence

The sponsor confirms governance with the relevant owners. A visible decision map shows the authority required and how a blocked decision is escalated.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the approval behind the next important commitment.

03 / Treating assumptions as facts

An untested assumption can become an invisible dependency.

Warning sign

The plan lists a supplier environment as available next Monday because someone remembers an informal conversation. No owner has confirmed its date or access conditions.

Better move

Label the assumption, explain its effect if false and assign a person and date to test it. Add the related risk or issue when appropriate.

Owner and evidence

The dependency owner obtains confirmation and records the source. The plan changes when evidence contradicts the assumption, rather than preserving a convenient date.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Mark one planning statement as confirmed, assumed or unknown.

04 / Keeping exclusions invisible

A missing boundary invites incompatible expectations.

Warning sign

The team plans one service desk, while another department expects the same configuration in all offices. Both groups believe their interpretation was agreed.

Better move

State included outputs, exclusions, locations, interfaces and acceptance owners. Discuss the likely boundary misunderstandings with the affected groups.

Owner and evidence

The scope owner obtains the required approval. Stakeholders can point to the same current scope version and the route for requesting an addition.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Write one exclusion that prevents a realistic misunderstanding.

The All-in-One PM Templates Bundle

940+ Premium Templates • One Payment • Lifetime Access

$49

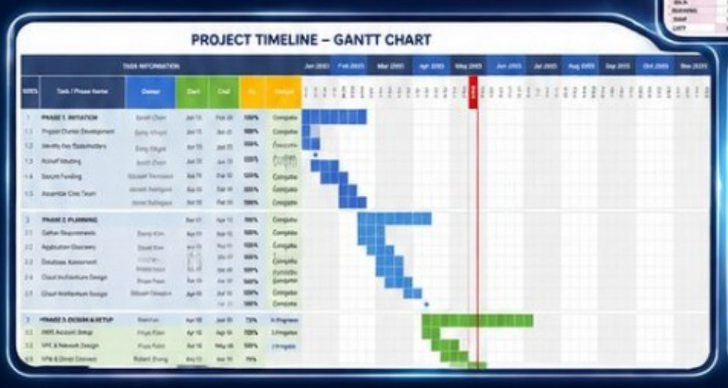
SAVE 94%

Worth $3,300+











EXCEL & GOOGLE SHEETS | PROFESSIONAL & RELIABLE | AUTOMATED DASHBOARDS | SAVE TIME & STAY ON TRACK | INSTANT ACCESS DOWNLOAD

GET LIFETIME ACCESS

05 / Defining acceptance at the end

Late criteria can turn completed work into unexpected rework.

Warning sign

The tool is configured, but operations rejects it because recovery instructions and failure handling were never discussed. The team thought feature demonstration was enough.

Better move

Agree observable acceptance conditions, evidence and ownership while defining scope. Include operating, user and technical needs at the appropriate level.

Owner and evidence

The acceptance owner reviews criteria early and participates in relevant tests. The team can connect each important output to its acceptance record.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask how one deliverable will be judged before work starts.

06 / Planning tasks without outputs

A busy task list can still omit part of the promised result.

Warning sign

The schedule contains many development activities but no training guide, support handover or operating acceptance. Work appears complete while the result remains unusable.

Better move

Start from required deliverables and break them into manageable work packages. Then identify the activities needed to create, verify and accept them.

Owner and evidence

The scope and delivery owners review coverage together. Every required output has a traceable place in the work structure and plan.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Find one required output missing from the activity list.

07 / Promising a date before estimating

A desired target is not evidence of a feasible plan.

Warning sign

A launch date is announced before remaining work, dependencies and specialist capacity are reviewed. Later estimates are adjusted to match the announcement.

Better move

Keep the target visible and develop an evidence-based forecast. Explain assumptions, uncertainty and the trade-offs required if the target is tighter than the feasible sequence.

Owner and evidence

The delivery team provides estimates and the decision owner chooses the commitment. The record distinguishes target, forecast and authorised plan.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

State which evidence supports the date you are about to promise.

08 / Omitting real dependencies

Unconnected activities can create an impossible completion date.

Warning sign

Testing starts on the plan before the environment, approved data and trained reviewer can be available. A spreadsheet date conceals the missing inputs.

Better move

Describe the input behind each important link and include external interfaces. Validate the controlling sequence and investigate imposed dates that bypass the logic.

Owner and evidence

Activity and dependency owners confirm the handoffs. The schedule explains how work reaches acceptance, including waits that cannot simply be wished away.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Trace one final milestone backward to its necessary inputs.

09 / Assuming resources are reserved

A name on a schedule does not confirm available capacity.

Warning sign

The same specialist is assigned full time to configuration, testing and another project. Each plan looks reasonable until the work begins simultaneously.

Better move

Check skills, calendars, leave, support duties and cross-project allocations with the resource authority. Sequence work or obtain a confirmed commitment.

Owner and evidence

The resource owner confirms availability and constraints. The plan shows feasible assignments and the action required if the commitment changes.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Check the next constrained person's allocation across all commitments.

10 / Hiding the estimate basis

A precise number can conceal an unsupported assumption.

Warning sign

A task is estimated at five days, but nobody knows whether that includes review, expected rework or the supplier's lead time. Comparing it with another estimate becomes meaningless.

Better move

Record scope, quantities, rates or effort, calendar, dependencies, exclusions and uncertainty. Ask the person closest to the work to explain the estimate.

Owner and evidence

The estimate owner maintains the basis and updates it when conditions change. Reviewers can reconstruct the reasoning instead of accepting only the final number.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Add the missing assumption that most affects one important estimate.

11 / Equating spending with progress

Money used does not prove that useful work is complete.

Warning sign

The project has spent 60 of its 100 budget units, so the report claims 60% complete. Much of the spending purchased inputs that have not produced accepted outputs.

Better move

Report accepted results and remaining work using a defined progress method. If earned value is used, apply its approved measurement basis rather than substituting spending.

Owner and evidence

Delivery and cost owners reconcile the measures. The report explains what was achieved, what it cost and what remains to be accepted.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Replace a spend-based progress claim with evidence of completed work.

12 / Double-counting commitments

Separate reports can contain the same future cost.

Warning sign

An outstanding supplier order is included in ETC and then added again when preparing EAC. The forecast suddenly increases without any actual change in scope or price.

Better move

Map actuals, unincurred commitments and all remaining estimates to the same work and cutoff. Identify what is already included before summing categories.

Owner and evidence

The cost owner reconciles the purchasing and forecast records. Each commitment has a clear incurred portion and remaining treatment in ETC.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Trace one supplier commitment into the completion forecast.

13 / Listing risks without responses

A register does not reduce uncertainty merely by existing.

Warning sign

A high-priority risk appears in every meeting, but no owner has a response, trigger or date for testing its assumption. Its colour changes while nothing else does.

Better move

Record cause, uncertain event, effect, owner and a proportionate response. Give response actions due dates and review whether they reduce the intended exposure.

Owner and evidence

The risk owner reviews residual exposure and action effectiveness. Completion evidence shows what changed, not just that a row was updated.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Give one priority risk a specific next response action.

14 / Mixing risks with issues

Different conditions need different management actions.

Warning sign

A test environment is already unavailable, yet the team records that it might become unavailable. Discussion stays focused on probability instead of resolving the current blockage.

Better move

Treat an existing problem as an issue with a resolution owner and escalation route. Keep related future uncertainties as risks and link the two records when helpful.

Owner and evidence

The issue owner confirms the observed condition and next action. Reports distinguish the current impact from possible later consequences.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Reclassify one uncertain or existing condition using the actual evidence.



Learn from 350+ top universities and companies

ILLINOIS

Duke UNIVERSITY

Google

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

IBM

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Invest in your career

Explore new skills

Access 10,000+ courses in AI, business, technology, and more.

15 / Consulting users too late

A technically delivered result may still fail the people using it.

Warning sign

Operators first see the upgraded request process during training. They discover that a common exception requires extra manual steps that the design did not consider.

Better move

Identify affected groups early and involve representative users in discovery, feedback and acceptance. Ask about real work, exceptions and operating constraints.

Owner and evidence

The engagement owner arranges meaningful review and records how input changed decisions. User participation is visible before the final rollout.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask an affected user to demonstrate a common exception.

16 / Reporting status without a decision

A long update can leave the reader unsure what to do.

Warning sign

The sponsor receives pages of completed tasks and red indicators, but no explanation of the forecast effect, response or required approval. The same exception returns next week.

Better move

State the cutoff, outcome evidence, forecast, important exceptions and specific decision requests. Include owner, recommendation and latest useful decision date.

Owner and evidence

The report owner checks the message with its audience. Decision makers can identify the action expected from them without reconstructing the project history.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Rewrite one exception as a clear decision request.

17 / Giving actions no accountable owner

A shared concern is not yet a reliable commitment.

Warning sign

The minutes say the team will confirm access, but everyone assumes someone else is handling it. The next activity reaches its start date without the input.

Better move

Assign a named action owner, output, due date and completion evidence. Confirm the owner can accept the commitment and escalate missing authority or capacity.

Owner and evidence

The meeting or work coordinator obtains acknowledgement. The action closes when the agreed result exists and the dependent owner can use it.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Replace one team-owned action with a confirmed individual commitment.

18 / Treating silence as approval

Lack of response can mean absence, confusion or insufficient authority.

Warning sign

A proposal is emailed with "assumed approved unless anyone objects." The recipient who can authorise the change is away, but work starts and spending increases.

Better move

Use the agreed approval route and obtain the required explicit decision. If a policy defines a valid deemed-approval process, verify that its conditions actually apply.

Owner and evidence

The decision requester confirms authority, outcome and conditions. The log links to the approval rather than inferring it from attendance or unread messages.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Check the evidence behind one approval the plan currently relies on.

19 / Accepting changes informally

Small unrecorded additions can accumulate into a different project.

Warning sign

A helpful specialist agrees to add one more report during a call. Several such requests later consume the test window, but the scope record still describes the original release.

Better move

Capture the request, assess combined scope, time, cost, risk and acceptance effects, then route it to the proper authority. Keep urgent delegated decisions traceable.

Owner and evidence

The change owner records the decision and updates connected plans. The team can distinguish approved work from an idea awaiting assessment.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Capture one informal addition before it becomes an assumed commitment.

20 / Rewriting the baseline to hide variance

A moving comparison can make deterioration disappear on paper.

Warning sign

An overdue milestone's baseline date is overwritten with the new forecast before the report is issued. The dashboard returns to green without an authorised change.

Better move

Report the current forecast against the approved comparison. Change a baseline only through the required authority and preserve version history, reasons and effects.

Owner and evidence

The control owner maintains the original and approved revised records. Reviewers can understand both today's commitment and how it changed.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Check whether a favourable trend comes from progress or a changed comparison.

21 / Starting too much work

High activity can increase waiting and delay completion.

Warning sign

Every team member starts several tasks, review queues grow and few items reach acceptance. Starting another item feels productive while blocked work ages.

Better move

Make work visible, examine capacity and agree practical controls on work in progress. Help finish or unblock existing items before adding more work without a reason.

Owner and evidence

The team reviews unfinished-item age, queues and completed outputs. A lower item count alone is insufficient unless flow and outcome evidence improve.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Review the oldest unfinished item before starting another task.

22 / Cutting required quality to recover time

An earlier date can transfer unresolved problems into operations.

Warning sign

The team proposes skipping integrated failure tests to protect launch. The report calls the time saved a recovery without showing the changed readiness risk.

Better move

Assess feasible acceleration, sequencing or authorised scope choices while preserving required acceptance conditions. Make any proposed change to those conditions an explicit authority decision.

Owner and evidence

Technical and operating acceptance owners confirm the evidence needed for release. The recovery recommendation explains risk rather than hiding omitted work.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Identify the acceptance evidence that your recovery option must retain.

23 / Rewarding a metric without context

A measure can encourage behaviour that weakens the intended result.

Warning sign

The team is rewarded only for task closures, so large tasks are split and difficult defects are postponed. The count improves while users still wait for a usable service.

Better move

Connect metrics to decisions and outcomes. Show definitions, counts, quality and age where relevant, and investigate the behaviour a target may encourage.

Owner and evidence

The metric owner reviews data quality and unintended incentives. Improvement is supported by accepted results and comparable trends, not one isolated number.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask what undesirable shortcut a chosen target might encourage.

24 / Leaving handover until the end

A finished output still needs people prepared to operate it.

Warning sign

Launch approaches but support ownership, access, recovery procedures and training are unresolved. The project team is expected to remain indefinitely because no receiving owner is ready.

Better move

Plan operating readiness early, name the receiving owner and rehearse the handoff. Connect documentation, support, training and unresolved obligations to acceptance and closure.

Owner and evidence

The operating owner confirms readiness and continuing responsibilities. Handover includes evidence and practical use, not merely a folder of files.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Ask the receiving owner which readiness gap most threatens the handoff.

25 / Recording lessons without action

A lesson matters when it changes a later decision or practice.

Warning sign

The closure report says communication should improve, but no specific condition, change or owner is recorded. The next project repeats the same late approval problem.

Better move

Describe the event, cause, effect and proposed change. Assign an owner, application point and check date; incorporate the change into a relevant checklist, template or working practice.

Owner and evidence

The improvement owner confirms adoption and later effect. A lesson is more useful when a future team can act on it without guessing what the author intended.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Turn one general lesson into a specific change with an owner.

Build a better-practice review

Use the twenty-five patterns to select a few useful improvements.

Select by consequence

Identify which mistakes currently threaten the outcome, next milestone or operating handover. Avoid launching twenty-five process changes at once; prioritise the most consequential condition.

Make the improvement testable

For each selected pattern, record the current evidence, intended change, owner, checkpoint and sign of success. Ask the team whether the response is practical.

Keep learning

Review the effect and adjust. Share a concise example of what changed and why, so the improvement can survive beyond one person's attention.

TAKE IT TO YOUR PROJECT

Choose three patterns and schedule a short evidence-based review of their correction.