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Project Management Skills for Leaders

A project is work with a beginning, an end, and a result someone is waiting for. It is not the same as everyday work that repeats forever. Opening the shop each morning is everyday work. Moving the shop to a new building, launching a new service, or rebuilding a broken process is a project. Leaders are often given projects on top of their normal jobs, with no extra training and no extra hours, and then judged by whether the project lands on time, on budget, and without burning out the team. This lesson set is about closing that gap with plain, steady skills anyone can learn and use.

This set helps team leaders, shift supervisors, small business owners, nonprofit coordinators, office managers, and anyone who has been handed a piece of work and told to "make it happen." You do not need special software to use what follows. You need a notebook or a simple document, a calendar, and the willingness to write things down instead of carrying them in your head. The methods here work for a two-week project with three people and for a six-month project with thirty people. The scale changes. The habits do not.

Why does this matter? Because most projects do not fail in one dramatic moment. They fail quietly. A decision is made in a hallway and never written down, so two teams build two different things. A risk everyone saw coming is never named, so no one prepares for it. A deadline slips by a day, then a week, with no honest conversation until the slip is too big to hide. Good project leadership is mostly the opposite of that quiet failure: clear goals, written plans, honest updates, and early warnings. When you learn to do those things well, people trust you with bigger work, and the work itself becomes calmer for everyone involved.

You will not find promises here about titles, pay, or promotions. What you will find is training in the real foundations employers and communities expect a project leader to already know: how to define the work, plan it in pieces, lead people through it, watch for trouble early, and close it cleanly so the next project starts smarter than the last.

What You Will Learn

- How to define a project clearly — its goal, its scope, and what "done" actually looks like — before any work begins.
- How to break a large project into small, ordered pieces of work with owners and dates.
- How to build a simple, honest schedule and budget that you can actually follow and update.
- How to lead a project team day to day: clear assignments, short useful meetings, and decisions that stay decided.
- How to spot risks and problems early, and how to talk about them plainly before they grow.
- How to communicate with stakeholders — the people who fund, approve, use, or are affected by the project — without surprises.
- How to close a project properly, capture what you learned, and hand over the result so it lasts.

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Lesson 1 — Define the Work Before You Do the Work

Every strong project starts with a short, clear definition. A definition answers five questions in plain words: What are we making or changing? Why does it matter? What is included? What is not included? How will we know it is done? If you cannot answer those five questions in one page, you do not yet have a project. You have a wish, a complaint, or a vague order from above. Your first job as a leader is to turn that wish into a definition everyone can point to.

The goal is the result in one or two sentences. "Reduce the time a new client waits for a first appointment from ten days to three days by June 1" is a goal. "Improve client service" is not a goal, because no one can tell when it has been achieved. A good goal names the change, the measure, and the date. You may not hit the exact measure or date, but having them forces honest conversation early, when change is still cheap.

Scope is the boundary around the work. In scope means your team will do it. Out of scope means your team will not do it, even if it is related and even if someone asks nicely later. Scope is where projects most often grow out of control. A leader who never writes down what is out of scope will spend the whole project saying yes to small extras until the project is twice its original size with the same deadline and the same budget. Writing "This project will not include rebuilding the website" on page one saves weeks of argument later. It is not rude. It is protective, for the team and for the people waiting for the result.

"Done" needs its own careful definition, sometimes called acceptance criteria. Done means the conditions that must be true for the work to be accepted. For a new training manual, done might mean: the manual covers all twelve required topics, two experienced staff have tested it with real trainees, errors found in testing are fixed, and the manager has signed the approval page. Without that list, "done" becomes an opinion, and opinions differ most at the worst moment — the deadline. Write the acceptance criteria with the person who will accept the work, not alone at your desk. Their signature on the definition at the start is worth more than ten apologies at the end.

You also need to name the key people at the start. The sponsor is the person who wants the project, funds it, and can make final decisions when there is a dispute. The project leader is you. The team is who does the work. The stakeholders are everyone else affected. Write their names down. A surprising number of projects stumble because no one was sure who could approve a change, so changes were approved by whoever shouted loudest or not approved at all while work waited.

Keep the definition to one or two pages. Long definitions hide unclear thinking. Short definitions expose it, which is exactly what you want before money and time are spent. Share the definition with the whole team and the sponsor, ask each person to say back in their own words what the project is and is not, and fix any misunderstanding the same day. That one conversation prevents more rework than any tool you could buy.

The Steps

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1. Interview the sponsor. Ask what result they want, why it matters now, what date matters most, and what they will personally check to call it done.

2. Write the goal in one or two sentences with a measure and a date. Read it aloud. If it could describe five different projects, sharpen it.

3. List what is in scope as short bullet points. Be specific: name the locations, groups, systems, or products included.

4. List what is out of scope with equal care. Include the tempting extras you expect people to request later.

5. Write the acceptance criteria — the testable conditions for "done" — together with the person who will accept the work.

6. Name the sponsor, yourself as leader, the team members, and the main stakeholders, with one line on each person's role.

7. Note the known limits: the budget ceiling, the fixed dates, the staff you can and cannot use, and any rules you must follow.

8. Share the one-page definition with the sponsor and team. Ask each person to confirm it or raise concerns now. Record the agreed version with a date.

A Worked Example

Priya leads a small team at a community health clinic. Her director asks her to "fix the intake process" before the busy autumn season. Priya does not start by redesigning forms. She spends two days on definition. She interviews the director, the front-desk staff, and two nurses. The real problem becomes clear: new patients wait an average of eleven days for a first appointment because intake forms are incomplete and staff must chase missing information by phone. Priya writes the goal: "By September 15, cut the average wait for a first appointment from eleven days to five days, by fixing intake so 90 percent of forms arrive complete." In scope: the intake form, the reminder messages, and front-desk training. Out of scope: changing the appointment software and hiring new staff — both named in writing, because staff had assumed both were coming. Acceptance criteria: the new form tested with twenty real patients, missing-information calls tracked for four weeks, and the director's sign-off after reviewing the wait-time numbers. The director reads the page, corrects one point — she wants the wait measured weekly, not monthly — and signs. Priya's team now knows exactly what success looks like, and when a well-meaning board member later asks her to also rebuild the clinic website "while you're at it," Priya can point to the signed definition and offer to log it as a future project instead of letting it swallow this one.

Common Mistakes

- **Starting work before the definition is agreed.** Early activity feels productive but builds the wrong thing faster. A day spent defining saves weeks of redoing.

- **Writing a goal with no measure and no date.** "Improve," "modernize," and "streamline" without numbers cannot be managed, only argued about.

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- **Leaving out-of-scope blank.** If you do not name what is excluded, everything is arguably included, and the project grows without limit.
- **Defining "done" by yourself.** The person accepting the work must help write the acceptance criteria, or you will discover their real criteria at delivery.
- **Hiding the definition.** A definition kept in your drawer protects no one. It must be shared, discussed, and easy for the team to check.

Lesson 2 — Break the Work Into Pieces You Can Manage

A project plan is the definition turned into pieces of work, in order, with owners and dates. The core skill is breaking down: taking one large, fuzzy outcome and dividing it into tasks small enough to assign, estimate, and finish. A task is well-sized when one person can complete it in a few days, its finish is obvious, and its name starts with a verb: "Draft the new intake form," "Interview three front-desk staff," "Test the form with twenty patients." If a task would take a month or needs five people, it is not a task yet. It is a chunk that still needs breaking down.

Start with the major phases. Most projects move through a natural order: prepare, build or do, test, deliver, and support the handover. List the phases first, then break each phase into tasks. Under each task, note what must be finished before it can start — its dependencies. "Train front-desk staff" cannot start until "Finalize the new intake form" is done. Dependencies are where schedules are truly made, because they reveal the chain of work that determines your end date. The longest chain of dependent tasks is often called the critical path. If any task on that chain slips, the project slips, unless you change the plan. Tasks off that chain usually have some slack — room to move without moving the end date. A good leader watches the critical path closely and gives the slack tasks less anxiety.

Estimating time is a skill you build by asking, not guessing alone. Ask the person who will do the task how long it will take, then ask what could make it take longer. People estimate the work itself and forget waiting time: waiting for approvals, for deliveries, for another team's answer. Add waiting time honestly. Then add a modest buffer to the project as a whole — extra time held by you as leader for surprises — rather than secretly padding every task, which hides where the risk really is. Record estimates in writing. After the project, comparing estimates to actual time is how your estimating gets better, project by project. No one estimates perfectly. Everyone can estimate more honestly with practice and records.

Assign every task to one named owner. "The team" owns nothing; when everyone is responsible, no one is. The owner does not have to do all the work alone, but the owner answers for its progress. Also assign a due date to every task, not just the final deadline. A project with one date at the end is a project you cannot steer. A project with dates along the way tells you in week two whether you are in trouble, while there is still time to act.

Finally, keep the plan visible and alive. A plan in a simple shared document or on a wall chart that the team updates weekly beats a beautiful plan in software no one opens. Review the plan at a set rhythm, mark tasks done, in progress, or blocked, and change dates openly when reality changes — with the reason noted. A plan that is allowed to be updated honestly stays useful. A

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plan treated as a promise carved in stone teaches the team to hide bad news, which is the most expensive habit a project can develop.

The Steps

1. List the major phases of the project in order, from preparation to handover.
2. Break each phase into tasks named with a verb, each small enough for one owner to finish in a few days.
3. For each task, write what must be finished before it can start. Draw or list the chain of dependencies.
4. Find the longest chain of dependent tasks — your critical path — and mark it clearly. These tasks get your closest attention.
5. Ask each task owner for an estimate that includes waiting time, then record it. Hold a separate project buffer for surprises.
6. Assign one named owner and one due date to every task. No task stays owned by "the team" or dated "soon."
7. Put the plan where the whole team can see it, and set a weekly time to update it together.
8. When reality changes, update the plan openly the same week, noting what changed and why.

A Worked Example

Marcus is leading a project to open a second location for a small bakery. The definition is signed: open by November 1, within a set budget, serving the same core menu. Marcus lists phases: secure the site, fit out the space, hire and train staff, set up suppliers, and open. Breaking down "fit out the space" gives him tasks: get contractor quotes, sign the contract, order ovens, schedule installation, pass the health inspection, and paint and sign the shop. The dependencies surprise him. The health inspection cannot happen until ovens are installed, ovens cannot be installed until electrical work is done, and the electrical work needs a permit that takes three weeks. That chain — permit, electrical, ovens, inspection — is his critical path, and it has almost no slack. Hiring, by contrast, has slack: interviews can move by a week without moving opening day. Marcus puts his energy where it matters. He submits the permit application in the first week instead of the third, checks on it twice a week, and orders the ovens early with a delivery window he confirms in writing. When the permit takes four weeks instead of three, the buffer absorbs it because he started early. Opening day holds. Without the breakdown, the permit would have been one line in a long list, discovered late, and the opening would have slipped by weeks.

Common Mistakes

- **Leaving tasks too big.** "Set up the new system" as one task hides weeks of work and gives you no early warning when it stalls.
- **Forgetting dependencies.** Tasks planned as if they can all happen at once collide in real life, where one thing must finish before the next begins.

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- **Estimating without the doer.** Estimates made by the leader alone are wishes. The person doing the work knows where the delays hide.
- **One owner for nothing, or one person owning everything.** Unowned tasks drift. A leader who owns every task becomes the bottleneck for the whole project.
- **Treating the first plan as final.** Plans must change as you learn. Refusing to update the plan does not protect the deadline; it protects an illusion.

Lesson 3 — Lead the Team Through the Work

Planning is only half of leadership. The other half is the daily work of helping people do their tasks well: making sure everyone knows what matters most this week, removing obstacles in their path, and keeping decisions clear. A project leader is not the person who does the most tasks. A project leader is the person who makes it possible for everyone else to do their tasks without confusion, delay, or duplicated effort. If you spend your week doing tasks while your team waits for decisions only you can make, you have the job backwards.

Start with clear assignments. When you give someone a task, cover four things: the result you need, the date you need it, the limits they must work within, and how and when to raise a problem. Then ask them to say it back in their own words. That thirty-second check catches most misunderstandings before they cost days. Give people the authority that matches the assignment. If someone owns a task but must ask you before every small choice, they do not own it — you do, and you have just made yourself their waiting time. Decide in advance which choices the owner can make alone, which ones need a quick check with you, and which ones need the sponsor. Write that down for the team. Clear decision rights speed up everything.

Meetings should be short, regular, and useful. A weekly project check-in of thirty minutes serves most projects: each owner reports tasks done, tasks next, and anything blocked. The leader's job in that meeting is to unblock, not to interrogate. Keep a visible blocked list and work it between meetings — chasing the approval, booking the room, getting the answer from the other department. That obstacle-removing work is unglamorous and it is the heart of project leadership. Long status meetings where people read out lists no one acts on teach the team that meetings are theater. Cancel any meeting that produces no decisions and no unblocked work, and replace it with a short written update.

Decisions need care. When a decision is made — in a meeting, a call, or a hallway — write it down the same day: what was decided, who decided it, and the date. Share the decision log with the team. This sounds like paperwork until the first time two people remember a decision differently, three weeks later, after both have built work on their version. The log ends that argument in one minute. For bigger decisions, use a simple habit: state the options, state the criteria that matter (cost, time, quality, risk), pick, and record the reason. Even when people disagree with the choice, a recorded reason lets them support it and move on.

People problems are project problems. A team member who is overloaded, unclear, in conflict with another member, or quietly convinced the project will fail will show it in the work long before they say it in words. Check in with individuals briefly and regularly, not only when something

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goes wrong. Ask what is taking longer than expected and what they need. Thank people specifically for finished work — naming the task and its effect — because steady recognition keeps effort steady. And when someone is struggling, act early and kindly: clarify the task, offer help, adjust the load, or escalate to their manager if the problem is beyond your authority. Waiting and hoping is not a leadership strategy.

The Steps

1. Give every assignment with the result, the date, the limits, and the way to raise problems — then ask the owner to say it back.
2. Write down decision rights: what owners can decide alone, what needs your check, and what needs the sponsor.
3. Hold a short weekly check-in: done, next, blocked. Keep it to thirty minutes and end with clear actions.
4. Keep a blocked list and work it daily. Removing obstacles is your main job between meetings.
5. Log every decision the same day: what, who, when, and the reason for larger decisions.
6. Check in with each team member individually on a regular rhythm. Ask what is slow and what they need.
7. Recognize finished work specifically and promptly, naming the task and why it mattered.
8. Address struggles early: clarify, support, rebalance work, or escalate — do not wait for a crisis.

A Worked Example

Denise leads a project to move her company's paper records into a digital system. Her team is four people borrowed from other departments, each still doing their normal jobs. In week two, progress stalls. In the weekly check-in, two members report "in progress" with no detail, and one, Andre, says nothing at all. Denise does not push harder in the meeting. Afterwards she speaks with each person alone. She learns three different problems. One member is waiting for the IT department to grant system access — a block Denise can fix with one call, and does that afternoon. Another is unsure which records count as "priority," so she has been scanning at random; Denise clarifies the priority rule in writing that day. Andre is overloaded: his regular manager added a major task without knowing about the project commitment. Denise goes to the sponsor with facts — hours promised versus hours available — and the sponsor negotiates relief with Andre's manager. Denise also starts a decision log after discovering that she and a team member remembered the file-naming rule differently and fifty files need renaming. From then on, every rule goes in the log the same day. By week five the project is back on schedule, not because Denise worked longer hours, but because she spent her hours removing the specific things in her team's way.

Common Mistakes

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- **Doing the tasks instead of leading.** A leader buried in tasks cannot see the whole project, and the team waits on decisions while the leader is busy.
- **Assigning work without the say-back check.** Most "they did it wrong" problems are actually "I explained it unclearly" problems, caught cheaply by a thirty-second repeat-back.
- **Meetings with no unblocking.** If your meetings produce no decisions and remove no obstacles, they consume the time they were meant to save.
- **Letting decisions live in memory.** Unwritten decisions will be remembered differently. The cost appears weeks later as rework and argument.
- **Noticing people problems late.** Overload and confusion show in the work first. Regular short check-ins surface them while they are still small and fixable.

Lesson 4 — Watch for Risks, Problems, and Change

A risk is something that might happen and would hurt the project if it did. A problem is something that has happened and is hurting the project now. Change is a request to alter what was agreed. A project leader handles all three with the same calm habit: name it early, write it down, judge its size, decide what to do, and tell the people affected. Trouble grows in silence. The leader who creates a team culture where bad news travels fast will always outperform the leader whose team hides bad news until it explodes.

Risk work starts at planning time, not when trouble arrives. Sit with your team for thirty minutes and ask: what could go wrong, what could go late, what depends on people or suppliers outside our control, and what are we assuming that might not be true? For each serious risk, judge two things: how likely it is, and how much damage it would do. A risk that is likely and damaging deserves a plan now. That plan can be to prevent it (order the part early), to reduce its damage (have a backup supplier), to accept it knowingly (note it and monitor), or to pass it to someone who can carry it (insurance, a contract term). Write risks in a simple list with an owner who watches each one. Review the list at your weekly check-in. Risks you review stay small. Risks you file and forget ambush you.

Problems need a different speed. When a problem appears, first describe it in facts: what happened, when, what work it affects, and what happens if nothing is done. Facts calm people; opinions inflame them. Then generate options — there are almost always at least three: fix it directly, work around it, or change the plan (scope, date, or budget) with the sponsor's agreement. Choose, act, and record it in the same decision log as everything else. Tell the sponsor early when a problem touches the date, the budget, or the promised result. Sponsors forgive early bad news delivered with options. They do not forgive surprises at the deadline. "We have a problem, here are three options, here is my recommendation" is the sentence pattern of a trusted leader.

Change is the third discipline. Once the definition is agreed, every change — however small, however reasonable — goes through the same simple gate: write the request, state its effect on time, cost, and other work, and get the sponsor's yes or no before doing it. This is not bureaucracy. It is protection against the slow creep that kills more projects than any single

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disaster. Ten "tiny" changes, each costing two days, cost a month. The change log makes that visible. Some changes are worth it; the gate lets the sponsor choose them knowingly, trading date or budget for value on purpose instead of by accident. When a change is refused, log it too, so the same request does not return monthly wearing a new costume.

Together, these three habits form your early-warning system. You will still have surprises — every project does — but they will be genuinely surprising things, not the predictable ones everyone saw coming and no one named.

The Steps

1. At planning time, hold a thirty-minute risk session with the team. List what could go wrong, go late, or prove untrue.
2. For each serious risk, judge likelihood and damage. Give each risk an owner and a response: prevent, reduce, accept and monitor, or transfer.
3. Keep a written risk list and review it at every weekly check-in. Close risks that have passed; add new ones as they appear.
4. When a problem occurs, write the facts first: what, when, what it affects, and what happens if nothing is done.
5. For every significant problem, bring at least three options and a recommendation to the sponsor early — before it touches the deadline as a surprise.
6. Put every change request, large or small, through the same gate: written request, stated effect on time and cost, sponsor decision before work starts.
7. Keep one change log. Record approvals and refusals with dates, so the total cost of change stays visible.

A Worked Example

Tom leads a project to run a company's first multi-day training conference for two hundred staff. In his planning risk session, the team names a risk he had not considered: the venue's backup generator is old, and a power cut during the event would cancel sessions. Likelihood low, damage high. Tom's response is proportionate: he confirms the venue's testing schedule in writing, arranges a backup room at a nearby site for the most critical session, and notes the risk as monitored. Another risk scores higher: the keynote trainer is a single point of failure — if she is ill, the central session collapses. Tom contracts a second trainer as a paid backup who reviews the materials in advance. Then, mid-project, a problem arrives: registration fills in three days, and the sponsor asks to add fifty more attendees. Tom does not just say yes. He writes the change request: fifty more people means a larger room at higher cost, more materials, and one extra support staff member. The sponsor sees the full effect, approves the cost knowingly, and the change is logged. On the event week, the keynote trainer does fall ill — and the prepared backup delivers the session to strong reviews. Tom's project was not lucky. It was ready, because risks were named while there was still time to act on them.

Common Mistakes

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- **Confusing risks with worries.** A risk you cannot describe with a cause and an effect cannot be planned for. Turn vague anxiety into specific statements.
- **Writing a risk list once and never reviewing it.** Risks change as the project moves. An unreviewed list is decoration.
- **Bringing problems without options.** Leaders who only deliver bad news train sponsors to dread them. Bring facts, options, and a recommendation.
- **Accepting changes verbally and instantly.** Every unlogged "quick change" spends the project's time and budget invisibly until nothing is left.
- **Punishing the messenger.** If the person who raises a risk gets blamed or brushed off, the next risk will be hidden until it is too late to fix cheaply.

Lesson 5 — Stay on Budget, Communicate Honestly, and Close Cleanly

A project budget is a plan for money just as the schedule is a plan for time, and it needs the same steady attention. Start by listing every cost honestly: people's time if it is charged, materials, equipment, space, travel, fees, and a contingency amount — money held for the surprises you know will come, usually a modest percentage of the total, controlled by the sponsor or leader and spent only through the change process. Track actual spending against the plan at the same rhythm as your schedule check-ins. Money problems, like schedule problems, are cheap when caught early and brutal when caught at the end. If spending is running ahead of progress — much money spent, little work done — say so immediately with facts and options. Never quietly move money between categories to hide an overrun. The overrun will still exist; you will just have removed your chance to fix it.

Communication is the thread that holds all of this together. Different people need different information. Your sponsor needs progress against goal, date, and budget, plus early warning of anything that threatens them. Your team needs this week's priorities, decisions, and changes. Other stakeholders need to know what will affect them and when. Build a simple rhythm: a short written update to the sponsor at a set interval — weekly for active projects — covering done, next, risks, and decisions needed. Five honest lines beat a glossy report. The rule for all project communication is no surprises. People can handle a slipped date they heard about six weeks early with a plan attached. They cannot forgive learning about it on the day. When in doubt, communicate earlier and plainer than feels necessary. You will rarely regret it.

Closing is the most skipped and most valuable phase. A project is closed when the acceptance criteria from Lesson 1 are checked one by one with the acceptor, the result is formally handed over to whoever will own it day to day, open items are listed with owners and dates (or honestly closed as not done), and the final costs and dates are recorded against the plan. Then hold a short lessons-learned review with the team while memories are fresh: what worked that we should repeat, what hurt that we should change, and what we would tell the next leader of a similar project. Write it in one page and file it where future leaders can find it. That page is how an organization — or a single leader working alone — actually gets better at projects instead of

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repeating the same lessons at full price every time.

Do not let the team scatter the moment the main result is delivered. The handover is where value is protected: the new owner needs documentation, training, passwords or keys where appropriate, and a named contact for the first weeks. A brilliant result handed over carelessly decays within months. Close cleanly, thank the team by name, and record the finish. Leaders who close well are remembered as leaders who finish — and finishing, fully and honestly, is rarer and more valuable than starting with enthusiasm.

The Steps

1. Build the budget by listing every cost category, including people's charged time, and add a contingency amount controlled through the change process.
2. Track actual spending against the plan at every check-in. Compare money spent to work actually completed, not just to money planned.
3. Report any overrun the week you see it, with facts, options, and a recommendation. Never hide an overrun by quietly moving money.
4. Set a communication rhythm: a short written sponsor update at a fixed interval covering done, next, risks, and decisions needed.
5. Tailor communication: team gets priorities and decisions; stakeholders get what affects them and when; no group gets surprises.
6. Close against the acceptance criteria, item by item, with the acceptor. Record final date and final cost against the plan.
7. Hand over formally: documentation, training, access, and a named contact for the new owner.
8. Hold a lessons-learned review within two weeks of closing. Write one page — repeat, change, advise — and file it where the next leader will find it.

A Worked Example

Grace leads a project to replace the aging phone system across a small law firm's two offices. Her budget lists handsets, installation, training time, a month of overlapping service, and a contingency of ten percent held by the managing partner. Weekly tracking shows installation running on plan, but in week three Grace notices training costs climbing: staff need more sessions than estimated because the new system's menu differs greatly from the old one. Money spent is ahead of work completed. Grace reports it the same week with numbers and three options: cut training and accept slower adoption, spend contingency on extra sessions, or delay the second office by two weeks to spread trainer costs. The partner chooses the contingency option knowingly, and it is logged as a change. At closing, Grace checks the acceptance criteria one by one with the partner: all phones installed and tested, staff trained, old system returned, final bill within the revised budget. The handover includes a one-page guide for the office manager and Grace's phone number for the first month. In the lessons-learned review, the team records the key lesson — "estimate training by how different the new system feels, not by how long the trainer's demo lasts" — and files it. The firm's next technology project starts with

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that page open on the table.

Common Mistakes

- **Tracking money spent without tracking work done.** Half the budget spent means nothing if only a quarter of the work is complete. Compare both, always.
- **Spending contingency silently.** Contingency spent without the change process is just an overrun with a nicer name.
- **Reporting only good news.** A sponsor who hears only progress stops believing the reports — and is blindsided by the first real problem.
- **Skipping closure because the team is tired.** Unclosed projects leak: open items ownerless, handovers incomplete, lessons unlearned and repurchased next time.
- **Losing the lessons-learned page.** A review held but not written and filed helps only the people in the room, only until they forget.

Try It

Choose a real project from your own work or community life — something with a result, a date, and at least one other person involved. If you have no current project, use an upcoming one, however small: organizing an event, improving a process at work, or completing a multi-week task at home with family help counts fully for practice.

First, write the one-page definition: goal with measure and date, in-scope list, out-of-scope list, acceptance criteria, and the named people. Show it to the sponsor or the other person involved and fix what they correct. Second, break the work into phases and tasks with owners, dates, and dependencies, and mark your critical path. Third, hold a thirty-minute risk session — even if it is just you and one other person — and write down at least five risks with owners and responses. Fourth, run one weekly check-in using the done, next, blocked format, and start your decision log and change log on the same day.

Keep all of it on no more than three pages: definition, plan, and logs. At the end of the project, close it properly: check the acceptance criteria one by one, record the final date and cost, and write your one-page lessons learned. Read that page before your next project begins. That single habit — learning on paper from every project — is what turns one project into genuine leadership skill.

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