



## 5 Key Principles of Successful Project Management

Projects can be massively complex, and project managers tasked with delivering on time and under budget certainly have their work cut out for them. Project managers are never alone, however; they can always rely on the guidance of best practices and established processes to produce superior results.

What follows is a summary of the five key principles of project management adapted into process steps that describe the way these principles will be executed to bring a project to a successful close.

### 1. Build a Strong Beginning

*“The Initiating Process Group consists of those processes performed to define a new project or a phase of an existing project by obtaining authorization to start the project or phase.”<sup>1</sup>*

The initiation phase of a project sets the tone of the project from that point forward. In this stage the project’s scope is identified, along with who the major stakeholders are. It is also important at this stage to “define done,” or determine what set of criteria will be used to determine when the project has come to a close and how its success will be measured.

It is essential that projects be built from a strong beginning. Some projects die in the initiation phase as well. Projects can be killed for any number of reasons, but recognizing that a project concept is dead in the water from the very beginning gives decision makers time to course-correct, saving potentially massive amounts of time, labor, and money.

### 2. Plan the Work, Work the Plan

*“The Planning Process Group consists of those processes required to establish the scope of the project, refine the objectives and define the course of action required to attain the objectives that the project was undertaken to achieve.”<sup>1</sup>*

Skimping on the planning phase can do a world of harm to a project’s success. Goals can’t be nebulous; they have to be nailed down and concrete. The means by which those goals are accomplished is just as important.

If the initiation phase is the first line of defense against the perils of scope creep, then the planning phase is the last line of defense. Scope creep is the slow expansion of a project’s scope to include more and more objectives. Scope creep can decimate time and budget estimations and can become so severe that by the time the project comes to a close (if it ever does) the result barely resembles the objectives identified at the outset. In short, scope creep is the enemy of an effective project manager.

### 3. Execute with Confidence

*“The Executing Process Group consists of those processes performed to complete the work defined in the project management plan to satisfy the project specifications.”<sup>1</sup>*

It was kicked off in the initiation phase, mapped out and planned in the planning phase—now the work to achieve the project’s goals needs to be completed. To stay on time and under budget, it is important to complete the work as planned. Diverging from the plan means entering uncharted territory that has not been accounted for in labor plans, resource estimates, or other budgetary or time plans.

Nevertheless, execution is not a “set it and forget it” phase. The time for planning is over, but that doesn’t mean the project is now on autopilot.

## 4. Do Not Set It and Forget It

*“The Monitoring and Controlling Process Group. Those processes required to track, review and regulate the progress and performance of the project; identify any areas in which changes to the plan are required; and initiate the corresponding changes.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“No plan survives contact with the enemy.”<sup>2</sup>*

No plan survives leaving the conference room. Clinging to a plan that jeopardizes a project’s success is never a good idea, and an effective project manager knows that in order to deliver on time and under budget all plans will need tweaks here and there, no matter how comprehensive or thought-out they may have been.

Monitoring and controlling the direction of the project is an essential process that injects flexibility and responsiveness into the timeline. It is also easier said than done.

Open lines of clear communication are an absolute must, along with a team environment that values honesty and the ability to prioritize the project over pride. During the planning phase, it is easy for team members and decision makers to marry certain ways of doing things and to nurture their own opinions of how work should be carried out and completed.

When this happens, it can be tough to hear that their plan or their idea needs to go back to the drawing board for the good of the project. At the end of the day, the data doesn’t lie. Effective progress tracking along with accurate data collection and reporting visibility helps facilitate a project that will invariably need a course correction here and there.

Project execution isn’t a “set it and forget it” closed loop. Delivering a project on time and under budget hinges on understanding that the execution of the plan is an open loop. Anything that can happen will, and no plan survives leaving the conference room.

## 5. All Good Things Must Come to an End

*“The Closing Process Group consists of those processes performed to finalize all activities across all the Process Groups to formally close the project or phase.”<sup>1</sup>*

The closing portion of a project is not just the part where the project manager files all the paperwork and shuts off the lights. It is also a time for reflection and introspection on the success of the project.

According to the method of measurement that was determined earlier, did the project meet its goals? What went right? What went wrong? Did the team meet the definition of “done”?

This “project postmortem” portion is an essential component of closing down a project. There is no better teacher than experience, and the experience and insight gained through the (hopefully successful) execution of the project should be applied to future endeavors.

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<sup>1</sup> Selected quotes sourced from the latest PMBOK guide.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from Helmuth von Moltke, 19th century Prussian army officer.