

Start Fast, Finish Fast: How To Complete Projects On Time

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I am often asked why most projects experience delays and how to prevent them. Most times they are leading questions such as: “Are communication issues with partner organizations the main cause of project delays?” or “Are technical challenges the main cause of project delays?” or “Are lack of resources the main cause of project delays?” Each of these are possible causes that may impact a project timeline and need to be assessed. In fact, you should assess each of these items systematically and add a number of other common items such as difficulty negotiating contract terms, difficulty sourcing materials, technical transfer issues, and a host of other common challenges. Most projects have one or more of these challenges. But are there any challenges that are found consistently across nearly every project? Yes: starting and finishing.



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Early in my career I noticed that people do a brilliant job executing the middle of projects. Once a project is defined and it gains momentum, the project moves along rapidly with ease and grace until it is time for final deliverables. Armed with an understanding of this nearly ubiquitous behavior, I have spent my career focusing on how to start and end projects faster and more efficiently.

Starting The Project Fast

The most common reasons that I hear cited for a slow start are:

- **Lack of Project Clarity:** Has the leader or leadership team that approved the project provided a clear project objective? More importantly, has a project lead been assigned that will ask the right clarifying questions and understand the intent of the project?
- **Resource Constraints:** Have you provided the project lead with adequate resources that are not distracted with other important work? Have you empowered the project lead to begin using these resources immediately? More importantly, do the resources know this?
- **Decision Making:** Is your project lead a fearless decision maker that knows when to ask permission and when to inform you of a decision they made? Does your culture reward people for making decisions (even if they are occasionally wrong), reward decisive behavior, and reward taking appropriate and justifiable risks?

Once these three items are addressed, there is room to address the many other items that may affect slow starts such as communication issues, insufficient planning, team dynamics and external factors. I would also add a best practice that I learned in the US Marine Corps; the 70% rule! When your plans are 70% formed, begin executing. Finalize the last 30% while you start executing. This will put you more than 30% ahead of any rivals because we all know that the last 20% of anything takes 80% of the effort. My apologies for all of the percentages, but you get the point. A more complete description is available in the book *Corps Business: The 30 Management Principles of the U.S. Marines*, by David H Freedman.

The Middle Phase Of The Project

Now that we know how to get the project started fast, what should the project lead do during the middle phase of the project? Yes, manage the team members who are now comfortably executing brilliantly, but there are three other focus areas:

- During the first one-third of the project, spend at least 10% of the time finalizing the project plans. This includes a project tracking tool visible to the team and understood by the team. If you use a Gantt chart, be sure to structure it so that it contains enough detail for the executors but can be collapsed to reveal the high-level project plan in seven to 14 lines. The detailed sections should include durations for each action, milestones and decision points with an empowered decision maker clearly defined. I recommend reading the companion previous article [“The Power of Decision Planning,”](#) by Ken Ford, Ph.D., PE, published in *Life Science Leader* on November 1, 2023.
- There are many team dynamics and project challenges to manage during the middle phase of the project, but I would like to focus on two that seem to always be present:
 - **Scope creep:** As leadership and the team learn more, there is always a scope creep temptation. The project lead needs to take one of two courses of action, either eliminate the scope creep or gain buy-in to increase the scope and adjust the project scope, resources and timelines. Do not be fooled into thinking there are any other options.
 - **Unrealistic timelines:** Unrealistic timelines can come from above or below. Leadership may not understand what it takes to complete the scope of the project. The project lead needs to help the leadership to understand. It’s just as likely that optimistic

team members may not ask for appropriate time and resources. The project lead must coach these people and help them to provide realistic timelines.

- During the last two-thirds of the project spend at least 10% of the time planning the project completion. Do not set all project item completion dates to the same end date, the project overall end date. In fact, only one item, the last critical path item, should have the same end date as the overall project end date. The project completion date needs to be known by all team members but to meet this date the team members need to understand that the completion dates for the individual items they are responsible for must be earlier to support the overall project completion date.

Finishing The Project Fast

As the project completion date approaches, the project lead must assess the likelihood of on-time completion. Much of the focus will be on item completion dates that have slipped. In my experience, teams become comfortable with the mid-project dynamic, making it difficult to close items out. The project lead should review the project scope with the team to ensure buy-in on the scope limits, have the team members define where they need to stop to satisfy the project requirements, and support the decision maker in making the planned decisions. This may be difficult for team members who have discovered new and intriguing items with scientific or logistical appeal. One way to manage this is to ask them to write a separate document outlining the work they would like to do next while they close out this project's item deliverable (report, etc.). Be careful to commit to having leadership review this proposal at the right level but make it clear that you cannot guarantee that it will be supported as a future project.

By starting a project fast and finishing the project fast, the project has the best shot of meeting the project objectives within the target time. The advice that I have listed here sounds easy, but it takes a disciplined leader to execute a fast start and fast finish. I wish you success with your next project.

About The Author:

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