

Efficiently Reach Project Destinations by Avoiding Project Drift

When a project begins to “drift,” it means the team and stakeholders are losing sight of the project’s established purpose. As communication muddles, plans change, and new ideas form, the original goal is often lost in the process. If allowed to drift, your project could end up lost at sea or shipwrecked far from its intended destination.

Project drift can cause teams to do unnecessary work or unintentionally start on a whole different project. Significant changes or new tasks may develop throughout a project, but if they are extending too far from the stated goal, they should be treated as a separate, follow-up project. If not careful, a team can deplete its resources racing toward the wrong finish line.

Successful projects refocus as they go, continuously ensuring their processes are still leading them to where they need to be. Teams that don’t hold themselves accountable to the goal are likely to lose sight of it and fail.

To avoid project drift, organizations and project teams must keep an eye on the horizon as they venture forward. In our experience, projects found more success keeping in line with the correct destination when organizations enforced the following actions:

- 1) **Establish clear project outcomes.** Formally define what you want to accomplish in a Project Charter to ensure there’s a common understanding among all parties. Capture the scope and the benefits of the project so the organization can agree on what its success really means. After the Project Charter is complete, share it extensively and invite feedback to gain support for the project outcomes.
- 2) **Regularly consult the Project Charter to maintain alignment.** Continuously revisit the Project Charter to confirm the project is still headed toward the desired result. Projects may initially go in a straightforward line toward the goal, but any unforeseen changes can easily take things off course. Insert the Project Charter into any checkpoints, breaks, or major shifts that occur as the team goes through the project’s life.
- 3) **Periodically utilize third parties to assess project health.** As projects carry on for longer amounts of time, they are at higher risk for trailing off course. “Don’t lose sight of the forest for the trees,” is a phrase to keep in mind. Teams can focus so heavily on achieving a milestone or deliverable that they don’t acknowledge how things might be veering off track. Engaging objective third parties to review the project’s progress will validate whether it’s on course to achieve the desired outcomes. An impartial health assessment will evaluate all facets of the project and allow the team to course-correct and prevent future complications.
- 4) **Be open to changes and distinctly document them as they occur.** Project planning assumes the direction things will go, but nothing is certain until each step comes to fruition. As business circumstances, new learnings, and changes in organizational sponsorship all fluctuate, prior assumptions will be adjusted according to what materializes. Recognize each change individually and incorporate them into the formalized processes and Project Charter as they happen. Be clear about these adjustments and how they may impact the project’s overall expectations or results.

- 5) **Embrace the possibility of redefining the project destination.** Some projects end up being more about the journey of discovery than the destination itself, especially because you may find a whole new objective somewhere along the way. In project management, we commonly use the term “progressive elaboration” to acknowledge that not everything can be known today, so we refine plans based on what will be known in the future. Some projects may even intentionally start with a broad, generalized idea of what the outcome may be so that it can be uniquely shaped as new information arrives. In this case, however, all involved must commit to shaping and distinguishing a specific project destination over time.

These conducts will help keep your organization’s projects on the right track. For all desired outcomes to be reached, management and leadership must prioritize these methods to avoid project drift. If projects are free to shift and transform without clear guidelines, the original goal can slip further and further away. Defining early on how these project modifications should be handled will prevent not only project drift, but also miscommunications and inefficiencies.

A project that follows a straight line to completion is, in our experience, rare at best. Everything is subject to external circumstances, new learnings, organizational shifts, and executional obstacles. These continuously unforeseen changes can push a team further and further away from the initial objective. Failed projects are ones that neglected to properly confront these adjustments, while successful ones avoid drift and stay on track by quickly refocusing after each hurdle.

Thought Logic has an impressive track record of successfully supporting clients all the way through to their project destinations. As project management experts, we engage from start to finish by implementing well-defined Project Charters, providing project leadership, and serving as third-party consultants to make objective assessments and recommendations. We consistently support project success with proactive strategies designed to reach each project destination as efficiently as possible. Reach out to our team today so that your projects can start consistently meeting the right objectives.