



# **The Essence of Project Management**

## ***The TenStep Approach***

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## Step 4

# Manage Issues

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# Introduction

This e-book is a subset of TenStep's TenStep Project Management Process®. The TenStep Project Management Process (TenStep Process) is a model for managing projects. It is a complete, flexible and scalable project management methodology. The subset of the TenStep Process included in this e-book is intended for use with TenStep's Essence of Project Management e-class.

The TenStep Process is scalable for small, medium, and large projects. In the Essence of Project Management, we have provided the example of the processes used for medium-sized projects as well as some basic techniques to make you a more effective project manager. The complete TenStep Project Management Process methodology includes project management processes for each project size (small, medium, large). It also includes more sophisticated techniques and a full template library. See <https://www.tenstep.com/> for information on licensing the complete TenStep Project Management Process.

The following e-sessions are associated with this section. To access the e-sessions, please copy and paste the links into your browser.

## **Understanding and Managing Project Issues**

- [20minuteitmanager.com/sessions/063501ISSUES](https://20minuteitmanager.com/sessions/063501ISSUES)
- [20minuteitmanager.com/sessions/063501ISSUES.ZIP](https://20minuteitmanager.com/sessions/063501ISSUES.ZIP)

## 4.0 Manage Issues

An issue is a formally-defined problem that will impede the progress of the project and cannot be totally resolved by the project manager and project team without outside help.

If a problem arises that the project manager and the team can resolve, it is just one of the many fires that will ignite and be put out in a given week. However, an “issue” arises if the problem is impeding the progress of the project and if outside help is needed to resolve it. This is the time to ensure that a process is in place to make the appropriate people aware of the issue and then resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

Issues management is one of the fundamental parts of the TenStep Project Management Process and it is one of the skills that all project managers must master. Many projects have to resolve issues. They cannot be ignored, and they cannot be deferred to some later time. Issues must be resolved quickly and effectively.

## 4.1 Manage Issues / Process

The processes used to manage issues are described in this section. These processes can be modified as necessary for your project, and then inserted into the Project Management Plan document that is created during the 1.0 Define Work step.

Remember that an issue is a “formally defined” problem that will impede the progress of the project and cannot be totally resolved by the project manager and project team without outside help. The term “formally defined” means that you understand the issue well enough that it can be documented. In other words, if you do not understand the problem well enough to document it, you are not in a position to resolve it. The Issues Form and Issues Log are used to “formally define” the issue.

## 4.1.2 Manage Issues / Medium Projects

	Role	Manage Issues (Medium Projects)
1	Project Manager	<b>Identify the problem</b> Solicit potential issues from any project stakeholders, including the project team, clients, sponsors, etc. Potential issues should be documented in writing to the project manager through a short Issues Form (optional) or email.
2	Project Manager	<b>Determine if the problem is really an issue</b> The project manager determines whether the problem can be resolved or whether it should be classified as an issue.
3	Project Manager	<b>Enter the issue into the Issues Log</b> If it is an issue, the project manager enters the issue into the Issues Log for tracking purposes.
4	Project Manager, Sponsor	<b>Determine who needs to be involved in the resolution</b> The project manager determines who needs to be involved in resolving the issue. The sponsor may be involved, or the sponsor may not have the expertise to assist in the resolution process. For instance, the resolution may require technical or legal staff. The problem may be contractual and require resolution from the Purchasing Department. However, at some point the alternatives will be discussed and a resolution will be made. It is important to understand up-front who needs to be involved in making this final issue resolution.
5	Project Manager, Team Member	<b>Assign to team member for analysis and alternatives</b> The project manager assigns the issue to a project team member for investigation (the project manager could assign it to himself or herself). The team member will investigate options that are available to resolve the issue. For each option, the team member should also estimate the impact to the project in terms of budget, schedule and scope.
6	Project Manager, Sponsor, Stakeholders	<b>Gain agreement on resolution</b> The project manager takes the issue, alternatives and project impact to the project sponsor and other appropriate stakeholders for discussion and resolution. The project manager may want to make a recommendation from among the alternatives as well.
7	Project Manager	<b>Document the resolution</b> The project manager documents the resolution and course of action in the Issues Log. If an Issues Form was utilized, it should be closed and filed.

8	Project Manager	<b>Add action plan to the schedule</b> Once a resolution is agreed upon, the appropriate corrective activities are added to the schedule to ensure the issue is resolved.
10	Project Manager	<b>Update Abbreviated Charter, if necessary</b> If the resolution of an issue causes the budget, effort or duration of the project to change, the current Abbreviated Project Charter should be updated.
11	Project Manager	<b>Communicate through the Status Report</b> The project manager communicates issue status and resolutions to project team members and other appropriate stakeholders through the methods established in the Communication Management Plan, including the project Status Report.

## 4.2 Manage Issues / Techniques

### **Problem Solving Techniques**

People have been creating and solving problems for thousands of years. In the last few decades, formal techniques have been developed to help in the problem resolution process. These techniques can be very useful resolving issues on your project. There are dozens of different problem-solving techniques available, including the following three:

- **Manage Issues / Cause and Effect Analysis**
- **Manage Issues / Root Cause Analysis**
- **Manage Issues / Pareto Analysis**

### **Resolve Issues as Soon As Possible**

The definition of an issue is that it is a problem that will be detrimental to the success of the project and cannot be totally resolved by the project team. That definition leads you to understand that issues must be addressed quickly. If a problem is indeed being classified as an issue, the project manager must take responsibility for getting it resolved. The project manager should have an activity in the schedule every week to follow-up on open issues to ensure they are being diligently resolved.

By the same reasoning, if there is no urgency to resolve the issue or if the issue has been active for some time, you should look again to see if it really is an issue. It may be a potential problem (risk) or it may be an action item that needs to be resolved at some later point. Issues by their nature must be resolved with a sense of urgency.

### **Try to Solve the Root Cause, Not Just Symptoms**

When issues arise, they should be solved as quickly as possible. However, try to resolve the root cause of the issue, not just the symptom. Solving the root cause will ensure that the problem does not resurface later in the project. The root cause can usually be found by asking a series of 'why' questions. Why did the issue arise? When the question is answered, ask yourself 'why' again, and again. When you cannot answer the 'why' question again, you are probably close to the root cause.

### **Sometimes You have to Make Decisions Among Bad Alternatives**

After reviewing the process and the techniques for managing issues, you may think that you should be able to successfully resolve every one if you only knew the right technique. In fact, you may find some issues that do not have good, clean solutions. It may be difficult in some cases to determine any good options for resolution. Other times, issues arise that are hard to resolve not because of a lack of options, but because of the difficulty gaining approval and resolution among a number of alternatives. In other cases, you may have a number of options that are less than optimal, and the ultimate resolution may be one that is the least offensive.

An example of this dilemma is an issue that involves internal politics. Usually when a problem starts to get mixed up with internal politics, you will find that the resolution is difficult because there is more to the decision-making process than a cool examination of the facts. When a problem becomes political, in fact, a resolution may be approved that is actually far less than optimum for the project team. However, a less-than-perfect

solution may be preferable to deadlock or the prospect of an even worse alternative approved.

In these situations, try to get the approvers to understand that a delay in the resolution decision usually does not make the result any more palatable. The project manager should strive to gain a resolution as quickly as possible so that the project can move forward. If the issue is political, the project manager will usually need to rely heavily on the sponsor and other management stakeholders to help in the resolution.

### **Create Guidelines for When Can Team Members Can Make Decisions?**

After stressing the importance of raising issues and potential scope changes to the project manager, it may seem to some team members that they do not have the ability to make any decisions at all. You definitely do not want to give that impression. As a project manager, you need to encourage people to accept responsibility and make decisions when appropriate. This helps the team run more efficiently and allows individuals to grow professionally.

As a project manager, you need your team members to handle all the day-to-day problems and only bring items to you on an exception basis. At the same time, you resolve as many problems as you can and only bring true issues to the sponsor for assistance. In general, team members need to ask themselves some key questions before deciding if they need help or if they can make a decision themselves.

- Is there an impact to effort, duration or cost? If there is, the project manager must be involved.
- Will the decision require you to go out of scope or deviate from previously agreed upon specifications? If so, the project manager must be involved.
- Is the decision politically sensitive? If so, the project manager must be involved.
- Will the decision require you to miss a previously agreed upon commitment? If so, the project manager must be involved.
- Will the decision open the project to future risk? If so, the project manager must be involved.

If none of these conditions are true, then the team member can make the decision. It may sound like there is nothing left, but in fact, most of the decisions that are required on a day-to-day basis do not meet these criteria and can be made by the team or individual team members.

### **Understand the Difference Between Issues Vs Action Items**

In many cases, project managers are not using the Issues Log to identify and track true issues. Many items that are classified as issues are really risks (potential problems) or just action items. Action items are activities that must be followed-up on at some time. They may or may not involve problems for the project. If you find that your Issues Log has dozens of items on it, you are probably tracking many action items. Because issues are large problems, there should not be many items open at any one time.

### **Ask Team Members to Identify Problems and Solutions**

Issues can come from team members, clients or any project stakeholder. It is a good practice to encourage people to help identify solutions along with the issues. When a

team member identifies a potential issue, ask them to bring one or more possible solutions. This process will help build accountability among the team members, but it will also help determine possible courses of action. In fact, if a team member proposes one or more viable solutions, the problem may be able to be resolved with the help of the project manager and never reach the level of an issue at all.

### **Engage the Client Early in Issues Management**

Issues management tends to go more smoothly when the entire project team is comfortable working through the issues management process from the very start. If issues arise early in a project, be sure to follow your issues management process and get the client engaged in the solution. Issues become more urgent as you get closer to your end-date. Don't let these be the first issues the client gets involved with. Earlier issues management experience will cause the client to see issues as just temporary hurdles that need to be overcome. If you haven't engaged the client earlier in the issues management process, the client may cause more harm than good when you absolutely need them at the end, since they are not familiar with the issues management process.

### **Break Very Large Issues into Smaller Problems**

If a large issue looks too difficult to be resolved in a timely manner, break it down into logical sub-issues. In many cases, the resolution of an initial sub-issue will drive the solution for the remainder of the issue. If it does not, it at least lets people understand the components of the issue, so that they can be attacked and resolved individually.

### **Look for Common Causes if You Find Multiple Issues in a Short Timeframe**

Sometimes you may encounter a number of them in a short timeframe. If you find multiple issues in a short time, look to see if some are related. If so, try to resolve the issue that looks like more of a root cause. The resolution of this issue may substantially resolve others.

If the issues look independent, try to resolve those with the most negative impact on the project first.

### **Make Sure Your Team Meet Your Deadlines – Even When the Customer is Not Meeting Theirs**

Many project managers face situations where they are asked to meet fixed dates with very little, if any, margin for slippage. It is hard enough to manage the dates on your own team, but sometimes your clients magnify the challenge by not meeting their commitments. For instance, they may not be available when you need them or they may not approve critical deliverables when they say they will. This can lead to more project delays.

From a project management perspective, you need to proactively utilize risk management, issues management, scope management, and proactive communication to your best advantage.

- **Manage client deadlines as a risk.** Identifying client responsiveness as a risk allows you to communicate the concern and maintain focus on the risk throughout the project. It also allows you to identify additional activities that will help you manage this risk.

- **Manage communication and expectations.** Proactive communications will help ensure that your clients understand what is expected of them and the consequences of missing their deadline dates.
- **Manage missed deadlines as an issue.** If the clients end up not meeting their dates in spite of your risk management plans, then you have an issue that needs to be addressed. Issues management (problem identification and resolution) needs to be performed. You do not have direct authority over the clients, so the issues management process helps you gain more visibility from your manager and the client managers for helping to resolve project resource problems.

Although it appears that you are being held accountable for client behavior that is not within your control, you do have control over the processes you use to manage the project. Manage risk, communication and issues proactively and utilize your manager and your sponsor to try to get everyone focused on meeting the deadlines.