

# Managing Known And Unknown Unknowns

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*Posted on June 21, 2021*



If you could look into a crystal ball and predict everything that would happen in the future with perfect detail, you'd be more than just a successful project manager. Unfortunately, none of us have that ability. Instead, we plan for and adapt to all the unknown circumstances life throws at us as best as we can.

Fortunately, it is possible to predict potential scenarios based on our experience as project managers and human beings. In an article written for the [Harvard Business Review](#), the author speaks to one effective strategy which considers likely worst-case scenarios as a way to predict potential unknowns. “Studies have shown that one of the most effective methods for improving outcomes is performing a so-called premortem—imagining in advance that an initiative has failed and working to understand the reasons why. This corrects against the natural bias we have to assume our project will be a raging success, and forces us to become the devil’s advocate: If we have to assume it’s a failure, what might account for that?” While not all unknowns will lead to project failure, it is important to consider how you will respond, adapt, and execute in the face of predictable and unpredictable worst-case scenarios to avoid failure.

### **Known (or Predictable) Unknowns**

It’s best to start with what you can reasonably foresee; known unknowns are the things you know will happen during a project, you just don’t know when or how much they will affect the project. Someone will get sick; that’s known. The problem is you don’t know who it will be, when they’ll get sick, or how long they’ll be out. That’s the unknown. Someone else will have to go to a training event they weren’t aware of while planning their activities, and someone else will be late on an activity. These are all known events, but you won’t know when the training will happen, or who will have to attend, or which team member will be late on which activities. This group can be further subdivided into the parts you can address while building your plan, like reworking and debugging, and the parts that you must wait to address when the monster raises its ugly head, such as illness.

### **The Unknown (Did Not See That Coming) Unknowns**

Unknown unknowns are the crazier things that you could never plan for in a million years. Things like the tsunami that destroyed Japan’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, a fire burning down your factory, or say, a global pandemic. No one sees these coming until it is too late. That is an unknown unknown. Or, what about the key contributor on your team that up and leaves the company with no warning? Again, an unknown unknown that you’re likely not anticipating at the start of a project. Thankfully, most projects don’t encounter such devastating unknown unknowns; however, unknown unknowns come in all shapes and sizes and need to be planned for.

### **How to Plan for What You Don’t Know**

Some unknowns are easier to plan for than others. For example, you can almost always anticipate an activity needing several iterations of testing, or additional time related to rework or debugging. These known unknowns can be proactively addressed during the planning phase by either building additional time (duration) into the affected tasks or by adding additional activities to address these risk factors. If you’re working on a project that requires numerous supervisory approvals, you know those will take time. Therefore, build these activities and time into the schedule.

There are known unknowns, however, that can't be addressed upfront by merely adding tasks or building in more time. Illness, jury duty, last-second training, home front challenges, etc. are an inevitable part of life. Unfortunately, those are harder to specifically anticipate, which means you won't be able to address them until they occur. Merely recognizing they are likely to happen, though, can help you respond and adjust your plan as needed.

Like those hard-to-plan-for known unknowns, managing unknown unknowns is difficult. Pandemics, fires, hurricanes, tsunamis *can* and *do* happen, but there is no way to plan for *when*. As the HBR article stated, it is helpful to consider what would need to happen in worst-case scenarios. Ultimately, response to the unknown unknowns requires a great level of flexibility. Since you can't just abandon your plan when an unknown unknown happens, be prepared to ask, "What can be done now?" Adaptability, creativity, and teamwork will be required as you consider a revised strategy moving forward.

As a part of your response to the known and unknown unknowns, there should also be awareness and understanding across the team that there may be situations that call for picking up slack or responsibilities throughout the process to stay on schedule. When everyone can anticipate the possibility of pinch-hitting, this can result in smoother transitions when necessary.

One thing is certain: there *will* be uncertainty involved in your project. And while some situations will be more predictable than others, there can always be certainty around *how* you will respond. Learn how to build a team dynamic that can withstand any unknown by getting a copy of my latest book, *How Teams Triumph: Managing by Commitment*, or tuning into my podcast, *The Conversation with Clinton M. Padgett*.

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