

# Projects Won't Always Succeed – Here Are 6 Reasons Why

By [Clinton M Padgett](#)

Published Feb 10, 2021, 12:29pm EST



In 1990, I worked for the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta as a sales equipment engineer. During this time, we were running a campaign known as “Magic

Summer '90." Part of this campaign involved Coca-Cola cans that contained cash or prizes instead of soda. Of course, Coca-Cola didn't want its customers to know which cans had the prizes, so the engineers needed to develop a can that could contain and deliver the prize but still feel like a regular can of Coke. The result was called MagiCan. The can looked perfectly normal from the outside but was filled mostly with chlorinated water mixed with a foul-smelling substance to discourage consumption, along with a small dry compartment so the money or prize would pop up when the consumer opened the can.

Not long after the MagiCans were released, a consumption incident with a consumer resulted in a considerable amount of negative publicity. Coca-Cola spent several weeks pulling products off the shelves and paying engineers to drain cans, refill them with hot wax and then ship the cans out again. In the end, MagiCan was not considered a successful project. But Coca-Cola isn't alone; all companies – including the global giants – have projects that fail. In fact, a [2015 report](#) showed that, out of fifty thousand projects, 71 percent failed to meet these three basic criteria: on time, on budget, and with satisfactory results.

In my experience, gained from almost thirty years of helping organizations manage projects successfully, these six common issues account for many project failures:

1. **Project managers don't have access to the people and resources needed to work on their projects.** Project managers don't have the ability to fire, hire, or reprimand their team members for failing to complete a task – and many don't know what is needed to establish a sense of accountability amongst team members.
2. **Project management is viewed as punitive.** Most team members are typically working on five or ten things at a time, so when a new project comes along, it's just one more thing to add to an already overwhelming

workload. For many, project management means that someone who is not their boss is going to assign them tasks and deadlines without their input, hassle them for the remainder of the project, and potentially report less-than-positive feedback to their superior. It's no wonder many see project management as punitive.

3. **Project team members have changing priorities.** When everyone who works on a project is likely working on several other projects, their priorities are constantly shifting. Every project is considered a priority for the person leading it. But when team members are pulled in so many directions, and everything is considered “top priority”, nothing ends up getting prioritized – or done.
4. **Project team members overestimate their availability and underestimate the amount of work needed to complete the project.** As mentioned in the previous point, everyone is working on multiple projects simultaneously. When a new project gets assigned, team members often make the mistake of being overly optimistic. They look at the new project in a vacuum, failing to take into account all of their other projects or their non-project work, so they overestimate their availability to work on the new project. At the same time, having not identified all of the risks, they misjudge the work needed to complete the new project. A truly deadly combination!
5. **Project teams refuse to recognize that some projects need to be killed—and killed early.** Some projects shouldn't go through to completion, but no one wants their project killed. For some, there's a concern of losing work. But for most, there's an element of attachment that's difficult to ignore. The last thing you want is to see your project canceled even if it's for a valid reason such as a shift in business strategy or

lack of profitability. After working on something for nine months, you become invested. When you are invested and have worked hard on something, you have a sense of pride for that work and an investment in its success. This results in a reluctance to pull the plug when necessary.

- 6. Project managers don't shift the worry curve.** Too often, teams – including the PM – put off planning a project because the deadline is far in the future. They think they have plenty of time. Plus, they have four or five other projects they are working on that are already in flight for weeks and months. Naturally, their focus is on these in-flight projects that have very clear, near-term deliverables rather than the yet to be planned new project with the nebulous requirements and the far-distant deadline. This is a recipe for disaster and will ultimately cause the project to enter the Panic Phase where quality suffers, costs rise, and failure is likely.

The good news is, there's a way to avoid, manage, and counteract each of these common mistakes. Your percentage of successfully completed projects can far surpass those statistics referenced previously. Learn more from Clinton's book, *How Teams Triumph: Managing by Commitment*.

Find [Clinton M Padgett](#) on [LinkedIn](#). Visit [Clinton's website](#).