

The PMO Roadmap to Reducing Project Chaos: 6 Steps to Smoother Project Management

COVID-19 and remote work have added chaos to every aspect of the day. The divide between work and life is more blurred than ever, and trying to find a balance between productivity and personal space is overwhelming. But a chaotic work environment isn't restricted to this new remote world.

In project management, chaos comes in all shapes and sizes. Teammates might seem unphased by overdue tasks and missed milestones. Fire drills may happen more often than planned projects. Your two-week sprints could feel more like one-hour sprints. Resources might be allocated and then reallocated over and over. Communication that's stuck in silos leads to confusion. Due dates may mysteriously shift without explanation.

No matter how many processes your project management office has put in place, certain issues may still remain — stubborn, persistent, and detrimental to your team's success (and your sanity). So maybe it's time to lean into that project chaos and investigate from the ground up. Why is this issue there in the first place? Why hasn't it been fixed already? Why is it a consistent issue? What is a lasting solution? How do you get team buy-in at every level? How do you adapt as new issues arise?

Answers to these questions will vary across projects, teams, organizations, and industries just as the solutions will vary depending on the specific type of chaos at hand. Whether you're trying to progress through a single problematic project or are looking to rework your organization's entire approach to project management, these six steps can serve as a roadmap to help any PMO find their own answers and manage their projects out of chaos.

1. Uncover the root cause of your project chaos

This may seem obvious, but it's much easier said than done. To find out what's triggering your project chaos, start by asking the right questions, interviewing the right people, and identifying the right patterns.

Ask the right questions. Create a list of the types of chaos you're experiencing, then interrogate each perpetrator until you can see the true cause behind the issue. Here are a few examples:

- Late tasks — Is the due date clear to the assignee? Is the same individual always late? Is the same type of task always late regardless of the assignee? Is the task timeline unrealistic? Is that timeline built into your project template?
- Siloed communication — Where is your team's communication happening and why? Are all teams communicating in the same channel? Are decisions being relayed to all stakeholders, or are you stuck in an endless game of telephone?

- Overworked resources — Are managers able to see their team’s workload? What about availability and vacation time? Are the right people being assigned to the right tasks? Are people in the same type of role being grouped together within your project management system?

Interview the right people. Make sure you’re conducting retrospectives with people who work at every level and at every stage of the project. This can help you track down where the chaos is having the most impact and target your investigation. This can also show you who you’ll need to consult as you work to assess a new solution to resolve the chaos. By looping in everyone from individual contributors to managers to executive approvers, you can drill down to the source and cause of the project chaos faster.

Identify the right patterns. Build and use reports to reveal patterns within and across projects. Are certain role types overloaded during the same week each month? Is one individual being overworked and others underworked? Is the same type or [category of chaos](#) happening across multiple projects of different types? Is everyone using the same template for the same project type? Is the same team often responsible for the most late tasks? Visual reports can give you a valuable top-down overview of your programs or groups of projects, so you can pinpoint what’s leading to your project chaos.

2. Find solutions that feel natural to your team

Now that you’ve uncovered why the unwelcomed chaos is invading your project, it’s time to figure out how to get rid of it. There’s no one-size-fits-all solution, so you have to figure out what’s going to be best for your team. Determining how your team works best naturally can help you find solutions that support their inherent style and habits while also driving productivity.

[Chaos theory](#) suggests that, “nature, while chaotic, follows regular patterns, as does human behavior in organizations.” So closely observing how your team tends to work can give valuable insights “on how to achieve better, more harmonious outcomes from projects... [B]y paying attention to patterns in human behavior, we in essence create a ‘green’—as opposed to ‘toxic’—environment for project success.”

You could apply chaos theory on your own, scribbling field notes about your coworkers’ every move (maybe their virtual background, their Slack status, or their new four-legged coworkers), but we think sending out some surveys is a more hands-off, less creepy approach. Use handy tools like [SurveyMonkey](#) or [Google Forms](#) to ask questions like:

- Are you a visual learner? Or do you prefer to-do lists?
- Do you want kick-off calls for new projects? Or is a robust request form better?
- What’s your preferred form of communication? (email, chat, videoconference, etc.)

Take your surveys one step further and ask your coworkers to suggest potential solutions to project chaos by posing questions such as:

- What key step is our approval process missing?
- What would make it easier for you to complete your tasks on time?

- How do you think we can better prevent burnout?
- What general solutions or suggestions do you have for the PMO?

Analyze survey responses to identify how people want to work and adapt your processes to the suggestions that make the most sense for your organization's goals. In a July 2020 survey Wrike conducted, 27% of workers stated their companies don't typically act upon captured feedback, so be sure to implement valuable suggestions and communicate any changes that you're making in response to the survey results.¹ While the right solution to your project chaos may vary across or even within teams, it's important to empower employees to work the way they do naturally.

3. Make sure you have the right methodology

You've identified why the chaos is present in your projects and how you want to resolve it, but is your current [project management methodology](#) equipped to handle these changes? Maybe you've been trying to make Agile catch on for a while, but survey results show your teammates are more interested in Waterfall. Or perhaps your approach was working fine in a physical office, but it's not holding up in the remote world.

As you assess how to manage your projects out of chaos, take the time to reassess whether or not you have the ideal methodology in place. You may find it's time to replace your existing framework, or you could decide that a hybrid approach is the best fit for your team.

A 2017 project management [survey by KPMG](#) showed that 80% of organizations are using more than one project management methodology in a hybrid approach.

Be sure to weigh the pros and cons of the [15 top project management methodologies and frameworks](#), and follow these simple steps to determine which one (or few) is right for your organization:

1. *Start with the end.* Look at your requirements. What does your final deliverable need to look like? What benefits should it provide?
2. *Assess your current processes.* What kind of environment does your team excel in? Do they thrive on collaboration, incorporating new ideas as they work? Or do they prefer an orderly, structured plan?
3. *Research methodologies.* Which one best supports your project's goals and your team's strengths? Which ones complement your project constraints, timeline, tools, and people?

Also ensure there's sufficient training, onboarding, and [change management](#) in place for whichever methodology you select. And take it further than just a one-time training. Hold office hours for ongoing questions, record videos to demonstrate common use cases, build an FAQ page, and communicate how this should reduce chaos. Do whatever you can to get team buy-in and have a successful implementation, so you have the right foundation in place to reduce future project chaos.

¹ Remote Work Index Survey, Conducted by Wrike, July 2020

4. Anticipate & prepare for unforeseen project chaos

Even with the chaos causes, natural solutions, and proper methodology identified, some project chaos may still slip through the cracks. But there are ways to anticipate and outsmart the chaos you haven't yet experienced.

Allocate time to [brainstorm future chaos](#), chaos catalysts, and potential solutions. It's best to do this during the planning stage, when projects may not be active yet. You may want to include some non-PMO folks in the conversation for more holistic answers to questions like these:

- What could possibly go wrong in this upcoming project?
- Is there a holiday during this sprint that will likely impact due dates?
- If someone gets sick, who can approve deliverables in their place?
- Is one designer overloaded, leaving another underused?
- Are the project goals clear and concise enough to execute?

Rank each potential issue you identify in terms of how much it will impact the project's outcomes. That way if more than one arises, you know which one you need to focus on resolving first. Set up ways to detect this chaos before the projects start, so you're alerted before the chaos gets too out of hand. And if unforeseen project chaos does occur, that's ok. Take a breath, stay flexible, find a temporary solution to keep the project moving, and hold a retrospective for feedback on how to prevent that project chaos in the future.

5. Encourage collaboration & communication to work through project chaos

The next step is to make sure that your team can work together effectively to combat and overcome project chaos as it arises. [Research shows](#), "that simply feeling like you're part of a team of people working on a task makes people more motivated as they take on challenges." So the more you can encourage a collaborative work culture, the more your team feels like they can work through project chaos or issues together.

[75% of workers surveyed](#) felt that having access to better collaboration tools would make teamwork more effective, boost productivity, and even increase occupational happiness. Here are a few ways to [build a culture of team collaboration](#):

- Learn about one another and embrace your differences
- Make responsibilities and next steps crystal clear for each team member
- Get feedback from everyone, even those who may appear more introverted
- Incorporate humor where appropriate and if your team's into it (read the room!)

You'll also need to instill streamlined and open communication into your team's culture — so everyone's notified when project chaos occurs and can quickly agree on a solution together. [Wrike research](#) shows that 16% of organizations are still lacking a standardized communication stream among all employees.¹ How will your team understand how to properly work through project chaos and [handle conflict](#) if they're discussing the issues in different locations? That only adds to the existing project chaos. Instead, empower them with a single tool they can use to collaborate and communicate, so they can make navigating project chaos less chaotic.

6. Choose a versatile collaborative work management software

Your last step is to find the right tool to help you reduce project chaos. 32.6% of workers say their companies offer multiple processes and systems, but they're redundant.¹ To make sure you pick software that's useful, adopted, and reduces project chaos, look for a few key characteristics and features:

- Visual dashboards every user can customize
- Custom workflows and reports for every team
- Real-time collaboration functionality
- Cross-functional visibility and communication

Find a work management software that's flexible and customizable enough to adapt to exactly what you need while reducing project chaos. You want a tool that works for your team, not the other way around. As you're vetting platforms, ask these questions:

- Will the software resolve the types of chaos you experience most? Will it do so at scale?
- Does it provide options for different work styles and personalities?
- Is it flexible enough for you to build your own methodologies and team culture into it? Can it support a hybrid methodology?
- Can the software help you flag project chaos sooner and anticipate project chaos more often?
- Does it offer enhanced team collaboration and streamlined communication in a single location across your entire team and organization?

You'll also need to make sure that the software you choose can keep project chaos at bay even in a remote work environment. That means easy accessibility, timely updates, and high security. A [May 2020 study](#) revealed that 48% of employees working from home now say they want to keep working from home, and [some companies](#) are offering permanent work from home options. Don't let our new remote world be the source of your project chaos. Opt for a versatile work management system that works how, where, and when you want — so you're better prepared for whatever chaos comes next.

Regardless of your organization's scale or industry, this roadmap can help you and your PMO team identify, work through, and reduce project chaos. And if chaos keeps getting in the way and making an unwelcome appearance in your workflow, simply revisit this six-step process to help you continue to improve your team's efficiency and productivity. For more on how Wrike's versatile collaborative work management system can help you reduce project chaos and why we're the trusted platform for 20,000+ companies in over 140 countries, sign up to [take a product tour](#).