



CAUTION

# Blindsided!

## Five Invisible Project Threats Successful Managers Must See

# Our projects may be complicated, but one principle is clear:

After twenty-seven years of helping managers master multiple, complex projects, I've seen just about everything that can go wrong, from the relatively minor frustration of supply delays to the very real and tragic consequences of a subsea explosion in the Gulf of Mexico.

While the circumstances behind every failure have their own particulars, they do share a common characteristic: lack of vision. By "vision," I don't mean a grandiose master strategy – I mean a basic lack of insight on what's happening on the ground. By vision, I mean seeing, plain and simple.

What, then, should managers look for? In the remainder of this eBook, you'll find five of the most common "invisible" threats that, under the cloak of darkness, prevent managers from getting a true picture of project progress that would allow them to make improvements. All five threats will be illustrated with real-life examples and accompanied by their antidotes, the necessary actions for achieving clarity. Finally, at the conclusion of this report, you will be invited to take a closer look at a system that makes it easier to visualize project issues and answers.

Good luck!

Mark Woeppel

You can't  
manage  
what you  
can't see.



# Conflicting Priorities

One project, one project manager, and one team to work on the project – nothing could be simpler. Yet this scenario is becoming the rare exception and not the rule. In most large companies, especially matrixed organizations, one pool of resources is managed by multiple managers, each responsible for a different project. While these managers see their own work clearly, the other projects that demand time from “their resources” remain invisible to them. As a consequence, the same set of resources work on multiple projects with almost no overall coordination among them, resulting in conflict: what work comes first? Who gets the priority?

Without a clear global view of these multiple projects, team members are left to fend for themselves, basing the allocation of their time on factors such as:

- Loudest and latest: Whichever manager calls most frequently and makes the most noise gets priority.
- “Bribes”: Alternatively, the “friend” who uses flattery and favors moves to the top of the list.
- People pleasing: Instead of focusing on any one project or manager, the resource tries to make everyone happy by applying a little bit of work on every project. Unfortunately, constant switching from task to task is ruthlessly inefficient, adding unnecessary days or weeks to each project.

When multiple projects create conflicting priorities, management has lost control. Resources are stressed; managers are frustrated; and frankly, real work capacity is stolen out of the system.

A person is completely buried in a large pile of white, crumpled paper. Only their arms and hands are visible above the surface. The person's right hand holds up a small, rectangular white card with the word "HELP" printed on it in a simple, black, sans-serif font. The background is a solid, dark grey.

HELP

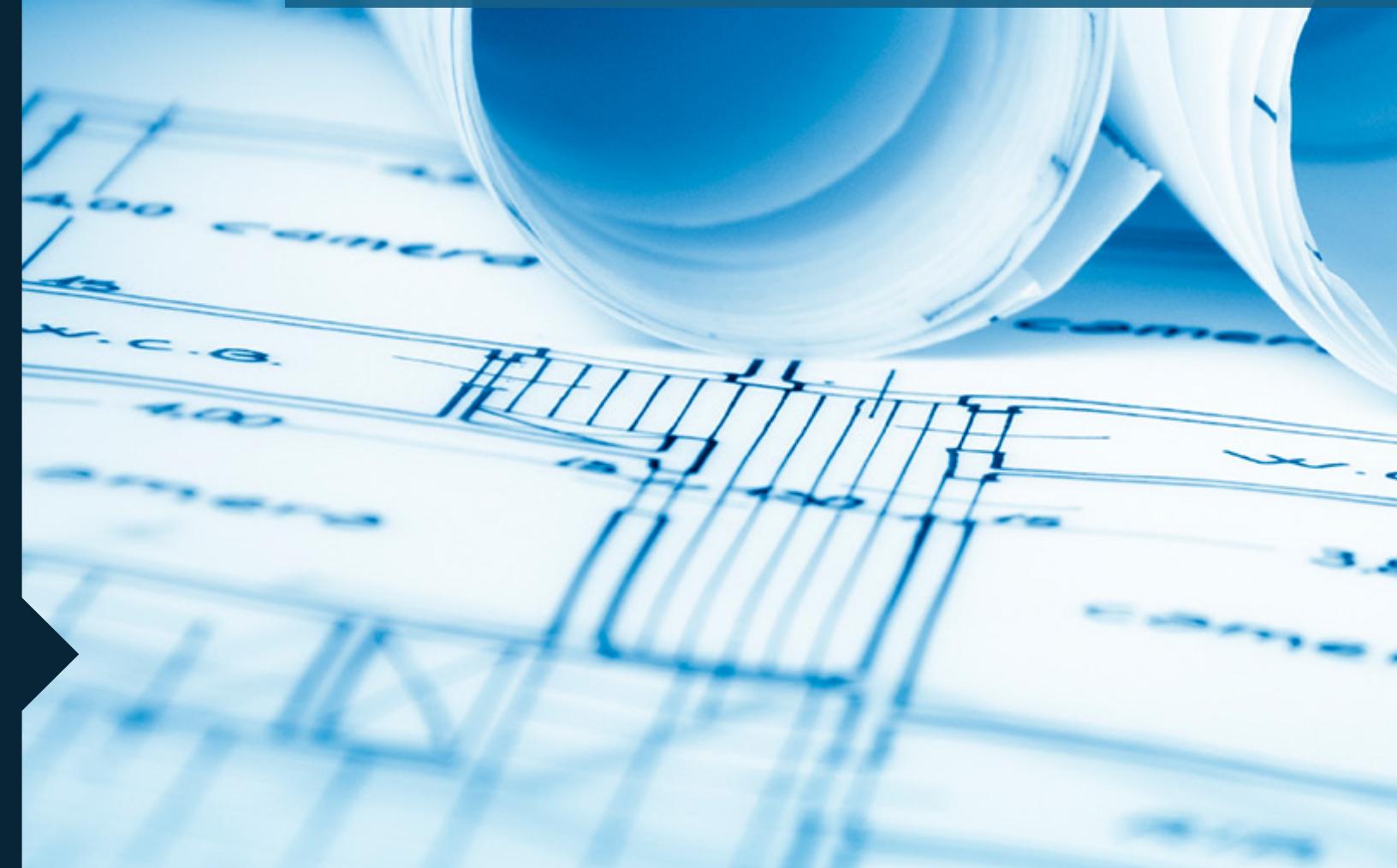


EXAMPLE

## DESIGN DEPARTMENT DRAWN INTO CHAOS

In a major oil industry services firm, a design team of five engineers juggled fourteen projects from five different project managers. Each engineer had specific talents that had to be applied to every project. But without coordination, the shop drifted into a chaos of conflicting priorities, delaying output.

To unclog the jam, the firm assigned a higher-level manager to the team who became the final arbiter of priorities – the sequence of projects assigned to engineers. Managers who wanted to set or change priorities could not approach an individual engineer, but had to go the arbiter. As a consequence, engineers were free to focus on one effort at a time, increasing productivity by 27 percent.





ANTIDOTE

## Set a single priority

The only solution to conflicting priorities is setting a single priority, not arbitrarily chosen by individual resources or imposed by competing managers, but determined by the overall goals and deadlines of the enterprise



A black mug with blue text "Don't F\*\*k Around" and "Brainstorming" is positioned on the left side of the image. Next to it is a blue pen, a silver paperclip, and a piece of paper with "fpm" handwritten on it.

itself.

# Death by Meetings

Just as individual managers are blind to every project except their own, individual resources often see their own tasks in isolation, independent of the overall project goal. As a result, they will behave in ways that optimize their efficiency across their particular tasks, which may not be consistent with what's best for their projects as a whole.

To resolve the disconnect between an individual's efforts and team objectives, the natural impulse is to call a meeting. Then another meeting. And another. But because the meeting participants remain oriented around their own tasks, these meetings often devolve into tedious discussions of work that has already been completed (the status), or on past mistakes in which team members compete to defend their own actions and shift blame to others. Instead of cooperative progress, the organization suffers a collective "death by meetings."



EXAMPLE



## CUBE FARM BECOMES FOCUSED TEAM

In Norway, a manufacturer's designers worked in isolation, each engineer cranking out designs within their own cubicles. They could not see how their work fit within the big picture, nor in relation to their colleagues' work. Meetings exacerbated their frustration and work fell six months behind.

Then management applied a visual tool that showed everyone, instantly, the current status of the project and where each of the tasks fit in the workflow. Instead of spending hours hashing out what went wrong, meetings became ten-to-fifteen minute gatherings focused on the future: what had to be done now to move the projects forward and who should work on it. Within eight weeks, they were able to clear their six-month backlog of work.



## Collaborate on the future

When meetings fixate on the past, they become exercises in self-defense in which no one, especially the organization, comes out the winner. By creating a simple way of visualizing the workflow, everyone can see where and how their efforts fit together. Instead of spending hours placing blame, meeting participants can spend a few minutes collaborating on what needs to be done to advance projects now.

BLIND  
SPOT

3





## Unlimited “Progress”

It seems like common sense: the more work dumped in the hopper, the more work gets done. But when the number of available resources remains static, increasing the volume of the work in progress (WIP) merely increases confusion, increases conflict – and decreases real productivity. While everyone looks busy, the true picture often remains obscure until deadlines approach, when the failure to complete projects becomes all too visible.

CLOSING THE AMOUNT OF



EXAMPLE



## TASKS OPENS PRODUCTIVITY

Remember our design team in Norway? Because they initially had no means for working collaboratively, assignments were distributed chaotically. In fact, two of the engineers had been given 24 projects to work on simultaneously. Months later, none of these projects had been completed.

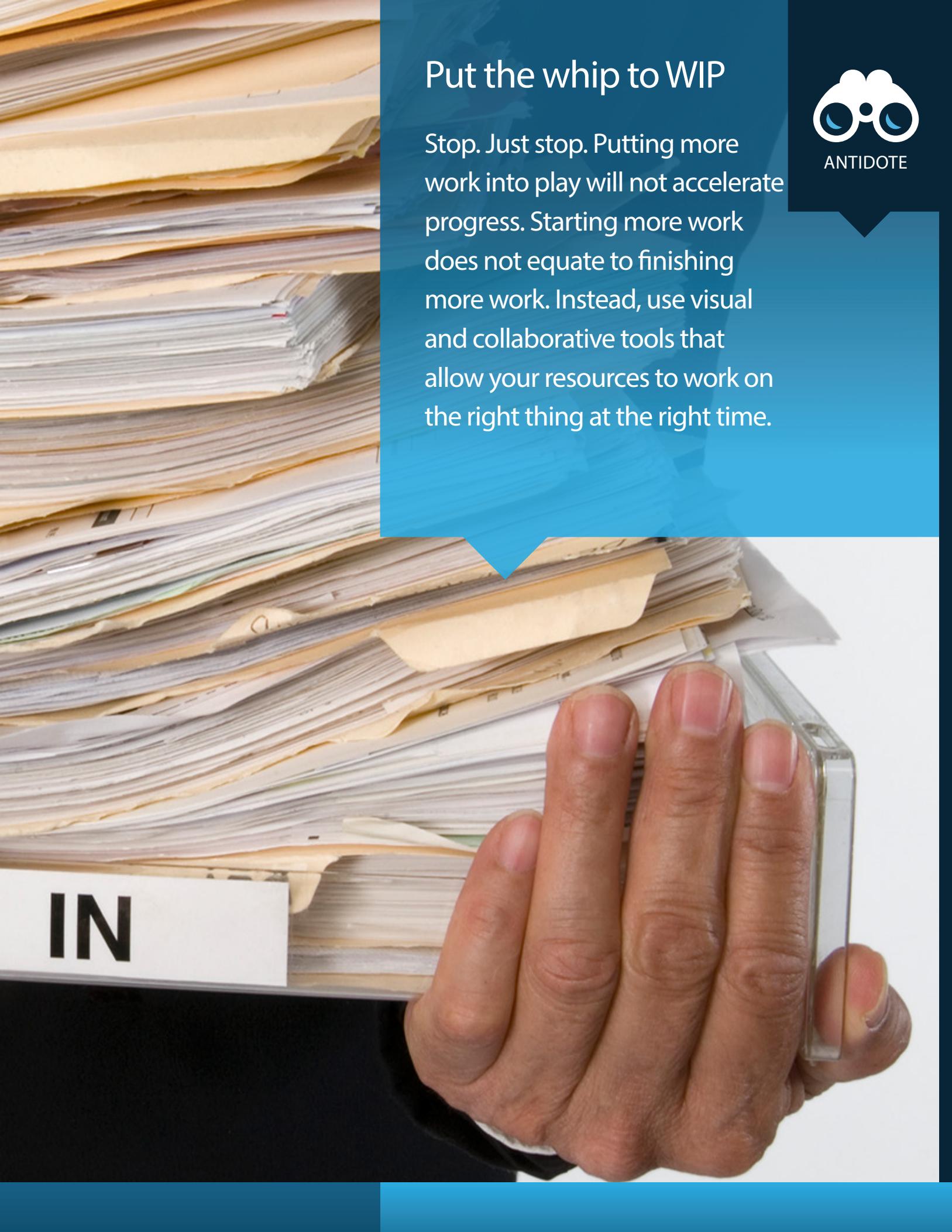
Once the team could see the entire workflow and engage in brief meetings that established common priorities, the WIP was cut down and work was brought into focus. Our two engineers now worked on just one thing at a time – and each project was completed on schedule.



## Put the whip to WIP

Stop. Just stop. Putting more work into play will not accelerate progress. Starting more work does not equate to finishing more work. Instead, use visual and collaborative tools that allow your resources to work on the right thing at the right time.

IN



BLIND  
SPOT

4





# False Starts

Ready! Set! Fail. Just as adding more work load will not lead to more accomplishment, rushing task initiation will not automatically lead to faster project completion.

Under pressure to demonstrate progress, managers will often start project tasks before they and their teams have all the necessary information, designs, supplies, and tools they need to complete the work. These false starts are more than mere nuisances; they're obstructions with significant consequences:

- Deceleration: As partially-finished work clogs the work flow, every project takes longer and longer to fulfill.
- False assumptions: When project resources don't have all the information they need, they make project decisions based on available data, resulting in...
- Re-work: If the previous assumptions were indeed incorrect, partially completed work will need to be redone, creating additional costs and delays.



EXAMPLE

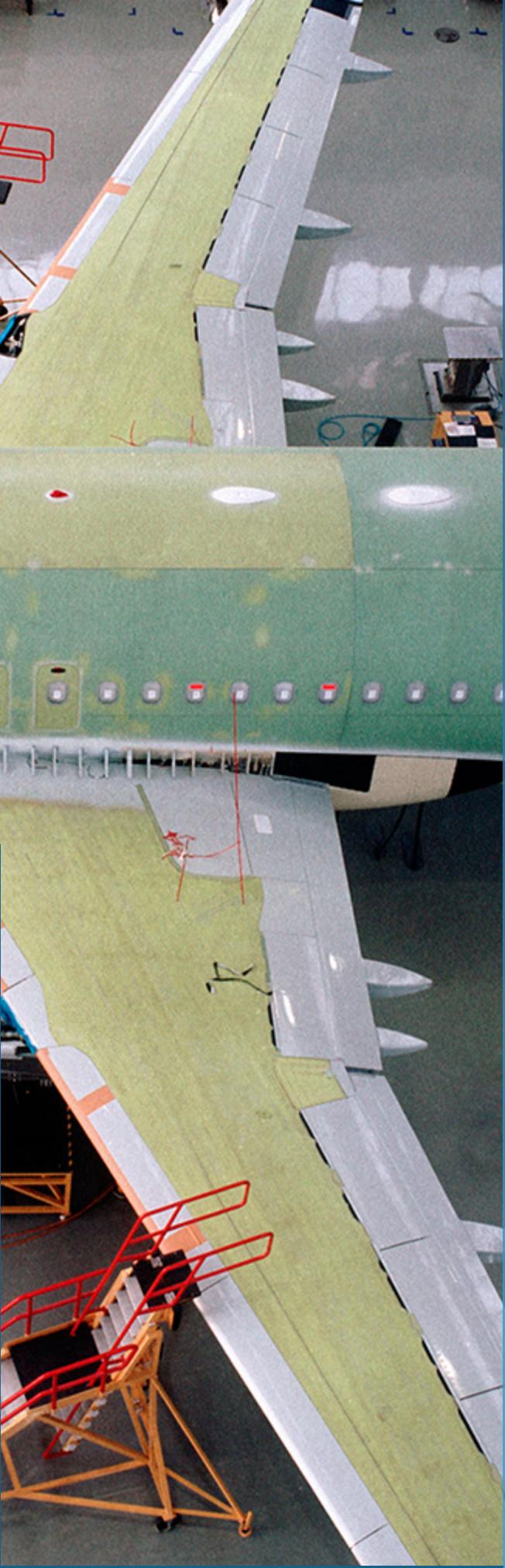


## PLANE CONSTRUCTION CRASHES

Airplane assembly is notoriously complex. In any given spot

on the work line, as many as 200 parts may need to be installed within a short window of opportunity, say three days. If only 150 of the 200 parts are available, the plane still has to proceed to the next staging area when the allotted three-day period is up, ready or not.

What happens when the rest of the parts finally come in? At that point, the plane is in a new place. At best, assemblers and tools have to be move down the line to install the remaining parts. But a darker outcome is more likely: current work has to stop to accommodate the old crew and worse, previous work may need to be disassembled to access the right installation points. To keep on schedule, managers order overtime – and costs begin to skyrocket.



## Clean starts with full kits



Don't rush to stall. Only begin project tasks when everything is on hand to complete them. Think of an auto race: when the pit crews have what they need at the time the car arrives, stop time is kept to a minimum. The project is like the car – the objective is to maintain forward momentum, not keeping everyone busy.

# Misleading Metrics

Numbers are never neutral. In a famous and oft-quoted observation, noted management guru Eliyahu Goldratt, in his book, “The Haystack Syndrome,” said, “Tell me how you measure me and I will tell you how I will behave. If you measure me in an illogical way... do not complain about illogical behavior.”

His point? Resources adapt to the means of measurement; in turn, managers get what they measure. While the call for data-centric decision making has driven a greater respect for metrics, many people fail to recognize when they measure the wrong things – and as a result, encourage the wrong behaviors.

Perhaps no mismatch is as great as the one between cost and value. In an effort to control costs, many managers apply metrics to resource utilization – a measure of raw output per resource. But the real value is not in individual “output” per se, but in the resource’s contribution to the overarching objective – completing projects that produce revenues and profits. By applying the cost-metric of utilization rather than a value-metric that assesses outcomes, managers may be creating rather than solving problems. Instead of encouraging work that contributes to the business, they are rewarding busy-work.

MENT made this



EXAMPLE



## CONTRACT STIPULATES STUPIDITY

In a move that could be described as “too clever by half,” a manufacturing firm structured its contracts so that it would receive partial payments upon project initiation. Unfortunately, project managers understood the stipulation as a mandate for immediate action, and encouraged their engineers to open as many tasks as they could as early as possible.

Sure, the company got its partial payments. But it also created a high WIP environment that elevated multi-tasking to outrageously unproductive levels. Bottom line: lost revenues (and imposed penalties) from missed project deadlines far exceeded the partial payment gains, jeopardizing the company’s profits.



## Align the metrics to value

Be careful with what you measure. Rather than create metrics that track task efficiency, apply metrics that reveal the impact of local decisions and behaviors on overall system performance.

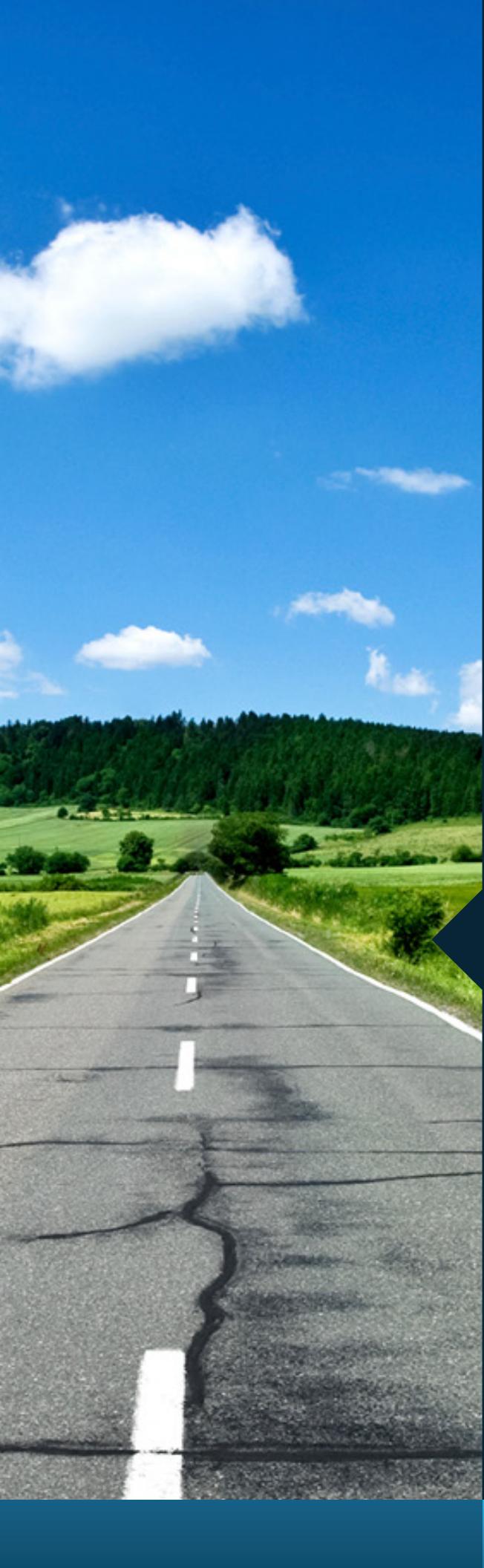
## CONCLUSION

# SEE THE PROGRESS YOU CAN MAKE

Are there blind spots impeding your progress? To get a clear picture of your projects, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are conflicting priorities creating confusion about what to work on?
- Are there multiple versions of a “hot list”?
- Do your team members understand how their work fits within the overall project?
- Do you have too many meetings that last way to long?
- Are your meetings punishing looks into the past, or effective collaborations for the future?
- Do you have many expediters (maybe the chief executive!) sorting and re-sorting work priorities?
- Do you know how many projects are currently in work?
- Do you have a formal mechanism to manage the total amount of work in the system?
- Do team members proceed on their work with complete information – or false assumptions?
- Does every project task begin with everything necessary for successful completion?
- Are you measuring task efficiency or overall project progress?
- Is it possible for team members to do well on their scores, yet projects fail to be successfully completed?

To get better answers, and see a clear path to making more productive progress, take a closer look at the ViewPoint approach

A photograph of a paved road stretching into a green landscape under a blue sky with white clouds.

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