



Everyone's Smart
University

Pitfalls to Identify and Avoid

Avoid making the same mistakes over and over

Chapter 11

PMG511

Project Leadership

Learning Outcomes:

11.1 Pitfalls

11.2 Common Project Pitfalls

11.3 Team Pitfall

11.4 Process/Product Pitfall

11.5 Are Pitfalls Risks?

11.6 Pitfall “Hot Spots”

11.7 Summary and Conclusion.

11.8 Self Assessment.



11.1 Pitfalls

“

It's a long
old road,
but I know
I'm gonna
find the end.

Bessie Smith



Good things do not come
easy. The road is lined
with pitfalls.

Didi Ariza

PICTUREQUOTES.COM



Pitfalls classic mistakes. *antipatterns.*



Whatever the name, there are certain pitfalls—negative situations and mistakes—that experienced project leaders see over and over.

Common Project Pitfalls.

- Common project mistakes are avoidable if identified early.
 - **Pitfalls** Also known as **antipatterns** – common issues often caused by those experiencing them.
- **Pitfalls** can occur at any time throughout the project, but their negative effects are often felt significantly *downstream*.
- Individual industries or organizations have their own common pitfalls.



Two types of The pitfalls Patterns and Antipatterns:

- **A pattern** is a generally accepted, reusable solution to a commonly occurring problem.
- **Antipatterns** are the antithesis of this: well-known, common problems which are also commonly caused by the organization experiencing them. The pitfalls in this chapter are **antipatterns**, and the practices used to prevent them (and their remedies) are patterns.



11.2 Common Project Pitfalls

Common Project Pitfalls

- Two categories covered here:
 1. **Team Pitfalls** (Blamestorming, Blowhard Jamboree, Groupthink, Heroics, Intellectual Violence, Loose Cannon, Poor Project Team/Stakeholder Relations, and Wishful Thinking)
 2. **Process and Product Pitfalls** (Analysis Paralysis, Death March, Fire Drill, Ineffectively Adding Resources to the Team, Rushing to Execution, Scope Creep, and Silver Bullet)
- **Awareness is key.**



11.3 Team Pitfall

1- Blamestorming

Team members spend excess time analyzing and admiring the problem rather than productively working to find a solution. Has the tone of an inquisition.

- **Blame and responsibility become more important than the issue itself.**
- **Team members are afraid to make (and learn from) mistakes.**
- **External pressures such as a difficult stakeholder or missed deadline can be a factor.**
- **Related: scapegoating, witch-hunt, cover-your-rear mentality.**



1- Blamestorming (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Measurements of progress should be based on facts rather than opinion.
- Focus on the most important issues (and the actions needed to resolve them) first, rather than the blame.
- Encourage a culture of learning from mistakes rather than hiding them.

2- Blowhard Jamboree

- Opinions, misinformation, or bias of (so-called) experts improperly influence important decisions, are often shared as facts, improperly influencing important decisions (planning, estimates, etc.)
- Because these opinions or misinformation are often touted as facts, they can form a flawed basis for planning, estimating, and other important project decisions that carry reflex down the line.
- Can be **unintentional**: confirmation bias or poor sources of information.
- Can be **intentional**: intentionally influencing important decisions for personal benefit.

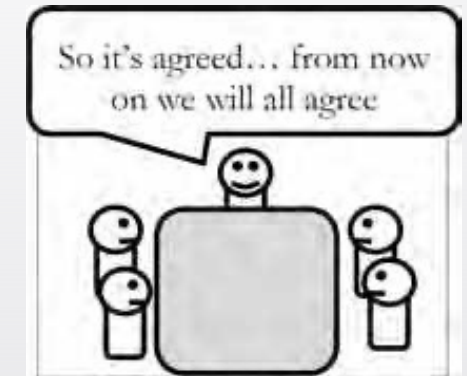
2- Blowhard Jamboree (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Honesty about why you have an opinion.
- Spend additional time analyzing problems and potential solutions.
- Seek better quality information: specialists, fact-based sources.

3- Groupthink

- One of the more well-known pitfalls.
- **Groupthink** happens when teams value harmony and conformity over diversity of thought, leading to less creative decision-making and opposing viewpoints.
- Making a decision as a group generally is beneficial because of diversity; groupthink erases that benefit, leading to wasted time for more individuals.
- Can be caused by a **fear of conflict**, which can emerge from debate.
- A **strong, central leader** can cause team members to hesitate in showing opposing viewpoints.



3- Groupthink

The Fix:

- Split the group into sub-groups, who discuss topics independently then recombine.
- Use a meeting coordinator rather than the 'boss'.
- If needed, assign a "devil's advocate" to introduce opposing viewpoints.

4- Heroics

In spite of all obstacles (lack of time or resources, poor planning, etc.), a few “heroes” push to complete the project.

- Team members who have a realistic view of the project may be seen as pessimists or “non-believers”
- **“Heroes”** often are left feeling **overworked and underappreciated**, opting to leave.



4- Heroics

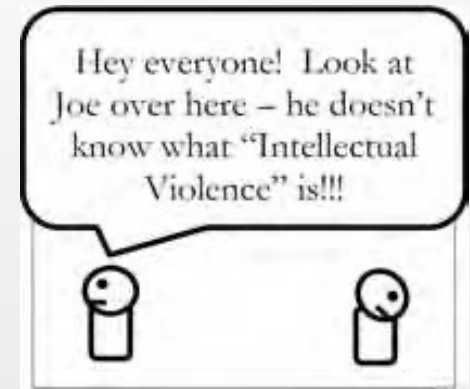
The Fix:

- Most important is a realistic view of schedules, resources, and what can be accomplished. Accuracy (not optimism) in estimating should be valued.
- A “sustainable pace” is an important organizational value – constant “panic mode” can lead to high resource turnover.
- Remember that encouraging a “can-do” attitude can create an environment that suppresses accuracy in estimates and execution. Strive to build a culture that values good work/life balance.

5- Intellectual Violence

One party understands a theory, technology, or jargon, and uses this knowledge to intimidate or subjugate others in public or a meeting

- **Fear of “not knowing”** something can cause a more closed, less collaborative environment.
- Can happen inadvertently and often stifles creativity within the team.
- This can result in a closed and defensive culture where every- one becomes **afraid of revealing inexperience** or lack of understanding in an ever escalating war of information.



5- Intellectual Violence (CONT.)

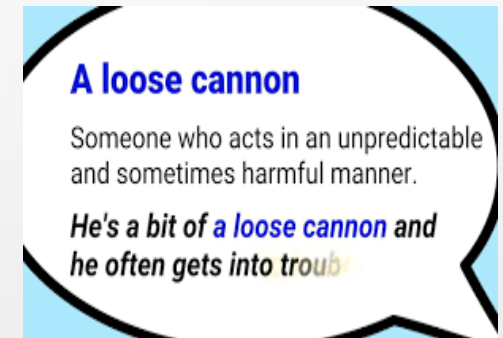
The Fix:

- Team leaders should monitor for intellectual violence continuously, including their own behavior.
- Teams must embrace mentorship instead of defensiveness.
- The awareness that another party doesn't know something is a **make-or-break moment**—instead of **intellectual violence**, the same situation makes the perfect opportunity for mentorship between the two parties, and a potentially disastrous situation becomes an opportunity for personal and team growth.
- **Related:** Bullying

6-Loose Cannon

A **single member** of the team constantly causes disruption within the team environment affecting the outcomes the team is working towards.

- Can be **exasperated** by tight deadlines, limited resources, or difficult work.
- Loose cannons often prioritize workplace politics above substantive work
- May have long-term effects such as **degrading stakeholder relations** or **team members leaving** rather than continue to work with the loose cannon.



6-Loose Cannon (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Personal attention by the team leader (mentoring, one-on-one time) may help address the individual causes directly.
- Isolation (work from home, separate office location) or termination of the loose cannon may become necessary.



7- Poor Project Team/Stakeholder Relations

Poor relations between individual stakeholders (the customer, other teams, etc.) can have a significant impact on the viability of any project.

- Different agendas, motivators, influencers, and personality types can cause friction.
- Contract negotiation, financial risk, and market forces can exasperate the situation

7- Poor Project Team/Stakeholder Relations(Cont.)

The Fix:

- Limiting contact, such as having one “point person” for each group can be effective, especially if conflicting information is coming from multiple sources.
- Eliminating stressors by engaging in appropriate planning and risk management can be effective.
- Consistent, clear communication is key.
- • **Related:** “Us vs. Them” Mentality

8- Wishful Thinking

- Wishful thinking may be the most common pitfall teams experience.
- Optimism, uncertainty, or ignorance can lead to inappropriate assumptions and poor decision making by project leaders and team members
- Can lead to insufficient planning, ignored risks, and overly optimistic schedules, asking for an extended deadline but offering to complete more work before that deadline.
- Often includes assumptions that outsourced/contracted work will be delivered on time and with sufficient attention to quality.
- Regressive renegotiation can lead teams to promise an expanded scope in exchange for an extended deadline, leaving the project even further behind.
- assuming that contractors or external resources will always deliver quality work on time with little monitoring.



8- Wishful Thinking (CONT.)



The Fix:

- Don't confuse positive thinking or optimism with wishful thinking. Realistically consider future scenarios—if one or more elements of your plan require things to go “just right,” you may be falling victim to wishful thinking.
- Schedules, realistic planning, tracking and risk scenarios should be considered carefully when creating schedules.
- If the team tends to avoid negativity, they may also fail to consider legitimate issues.
- **Related:** Procrastination, Blind Optimism

11.4 Process/Product Pitfall

1- Analysis Paralysis

- Teams demonstrate **reluctance** in moving out of the **early/planning stages** of a project into implementation.
- Often caused by the **fear of failure, unclear channels of accountability, micromanagement, or a problem which has no apparent solution.**
- **“Death by planning,”** an overly complex plan can increase projects costs significantly.
- Too much time spent in early stages can cause schedule pressure later on.



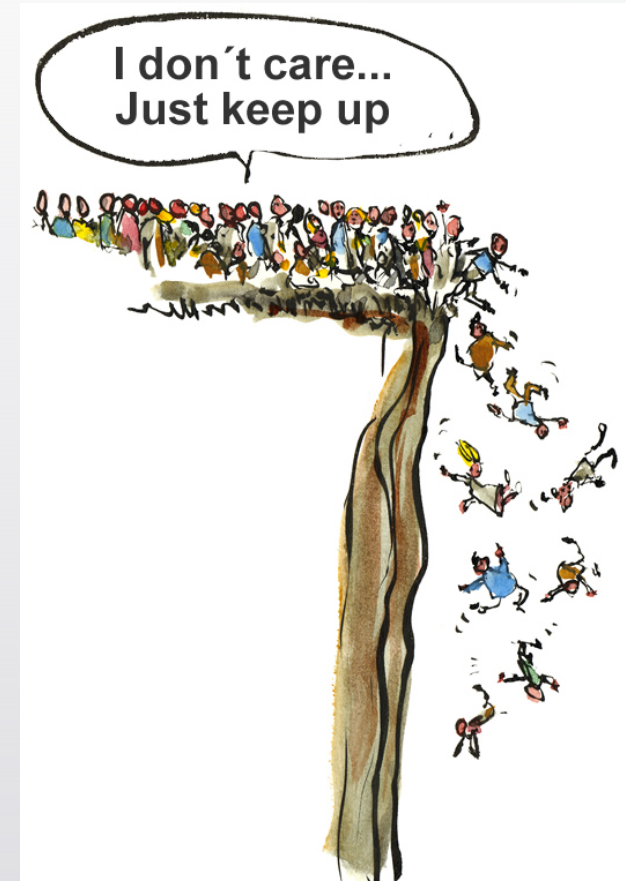
1- Analysis Paralysis (CONT.)

The Fix:

- An incremental/cyclical process allows the team to plan/implement a bit at a time.
- Creating and demonstrating prototypes can alleviate the risk of early missteps.
- Leaders and teams must be willing to learn from failure (a non-operational mindset)
- **Related:** Fear of Commitment.

2- Death March

- Have you ever participated in a project you felt was destined to fail?
- “Death marches” are characterized by unattainable goals or deadlines, unsustainable work- loads, and supervisors who seem out of touch with the project team.
- This type of project environment can have a devastating effect on morale and team member retention—often “heroes” who commit to the project’s completion choose to leave soon after it’s finished in fear they will encounter a similar situation in the future.



2- Death March (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Avoid committing to schedules and budgets before initial planning and estimates are completed.
- Increase scheduling, budget, and tracking visibility to management.
- Be sure to properly reward team members who have “stuck it out” or risk them leaving.
- Avoid committing to due dates before estimation and scheduling .
- Finally, if a death march does occur, **you should make an effort to reward successful team members with an incentive that exceeds the price (time, emotional) they paid while working on the project.**

3- Fire Drill

“Fire drills” are characterized by constantly shifting priorities and a disorganized, reactive project environment.

- Can be caused by **poor leadership ambiguous** or **constantly shifting goals**, or a **hesitation to begin** or **commit to a course of action**.
- Some team members prefer a “fire drill” environment because **quality work or lack of individual productivity**



3- Fire Drill (CONT.)

The Fix:

- One effective strategy is “**project management sheltering**,” where the team leader personally acts as a single link with the outside world, working to create a consistent, evenly-prioritized work environment for the team.
- Eliminating the circumstances that lead to “fire drills” is the best fix.

4- Ineffectively Adding Resources to the Team

Adding resources who **don't have proper skills/training or who are ineffectively managed can result in less productivity than expected.**

- Teams that hire external contractors often **don't manage them effectively.**
- Adding people to an already late project hoping to **"catch up"** can leave the team even further behind
- Group work can introduce the opportunity for "social loafing," allowing individuals to expend less effort (without being noticed) than if they worked alone



4- Ineffectively Adding Resources to the Team (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Understand that introducing new team members will require a large initial commitment and effort before gains are realized.
- Engage current team members in bringing new ones “up to speed”

5- Rushing to Execution

Attempting to **show “real” progress sooner**, the project spends less time in the initiation and planning phases so that they can enter the execution phase sooner.

- Early project phases require more discipline, forethought, and may bring more pressure from the customer or management who have less visibility of progress
- **Upstream activities** such as design iterations, thorough estimation, risk management, and formal approval/signoff are often skipped, **leading to issues downstream**
- **Rushing to the execution phase** of projects can become so commonplace that people may begin to accept the consequences of doing so as fact rather than circumstance.
-

5- Rushing to Execution (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Properly consider early project activities, giving early achievements recognition similar to those in the execution phase
- Retrospectives and lessons learned from previous projects will often call for increased early-project efforts (planning, estimation, stakeholder analysis, etc.)

6- Scope Creep

Also known as “feature creep” .

As the project progresses, **new requirements/specifications are slowly added**. Eventually, this has a major cumulative effect on the schedule or resources.

- **Additional scope** is just as likely to be added by the team as by the customer or other stakeholders
- Shortchanging *upstream* activities such as writing a scope statement or detailed specifications increases the likelihood of scope creep.



6- Scope Creep (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Implement strong “change management” controls such as signoff for scope changes
- incremental (agile) methods allow for and even expect requirements/specifications changes throughout the project. Consider implementing them if needed.

7- Silver Bullet

A new tool, technology, technique, or process is thought to have a “magical” effect on projects.

- May be caused by marketing hype, previous success, or wishful thinking.
- Can lead to poor performance or unrealistic estimates, ultimately leading to projects that are behind schedule
- In the same way that a silver bullet may be considered a **quick and easy solution** for were wolves, many teams make the mistake of thinking that a new tool, technology, or process will have magical effect on their projects.



7- Silver Bullet (CONT.)

The Fix:

- Manage “opportunities” like “risks,” carefully considering their chance of occurring as well as realistically analyzing their potential impact.
- When introducing new tools, products, or processes, understand that adoption of new ideas takes time, possibly more than might be saved.

11.5 Are Pitfalls Risks?

Are Pitfalls Risks?

- Pitfalls share all three of the features that define risks (uncertainty, loss, and manageability)
- **Are they actually risks?** The short answer is **yes**, but they are unlikely to appear on most risk registers. Because of their broad, universal nature.
- pitfalls are hard to quantify into the probability and impact calculations needed to analyze them.
- They are a risk that must be monitored by both the Team and the team leader, and simply understanding the nature of each pitfall is often enough to promote resistance to their taking root.

11.6 Pitfall “Hot Spots”

Pitfall “Hot Spots”

- Each of the pitfalls in this chapter represents **a constant hazard** to both the team and the project it's working on, but there are parts of the project that represent “hot-spots,” or areas of increased likelihood where the pitfall may manifest itself.
- If pitfalls do occur, their negative results will inevitably manifest themselves later in the project when **“the damage has already been done.”** Put another way, mistakes or circumstances have **a downstream effect on a project**—this means that project leaders must carefully consider **upstream manifestations of pitfalls as the project progresses and work to mitigate their effects down the road.**
- Though far from exhaustive, the following table is designed to help you consider both how pitfalls may present themselves and the consequences that may be felt from them:

Pitfall “Hot Spots”

- Pitfalls often occur during an early phase, causing negative consequences at later phases



	Initiation	Planning	Execution	Closing
Blame-storming (page 180)			Mistakes from previous phases or in the execution itself could be a temptation for blamestorming	Missed deadlines or unhappy stakeholders could trigger blamestorming behavior
Blowhard Jamboree (page 180)	Can manifest when defining the root causes of problems to be solved	Could occur during discussions or disagreements in the planning phase		
Group Think (page 181)	Could hamper ability to explore problems and find root causes	Could result in less creative designs and solutions	Verification or testing efforts may fail to consider diverse scenarios	

	Initiation	Planning	Execution	Closing
Heroics (page 181)		Heroics from the last project may affect expectations for the next, resulting in poor estimating, etc.	This is primarily where heroics occur	Looming delivery deadlines fuel heroics. "Heroes" may choose to leave the team rather than risk encountering a similar situation in the future
Intellectual Violence (page 182)	Can manifest when team is learning about the problem domain	Team members may be afraid to suggest creative solutions for fear of intellectual violence	A culture that allows intellectual violence may also encourage over-cautious work behaviors, slowing down the project	
Loose Cannon (page 182)	Can agitate stakeholders during initial requirements/specification gathering efforts	Difficult tasks such as estimating and planning become even more so with a loose cannon on the team	Team may be reluctant to remove loose cannon for fear of falling behind schedule	Individuals may be tempted to leave the team to avoid future projects with the loose cannon
Poor Project Team/Stakeholder Relations (page 183)	Poor relations can result in inability to accurately define the problem and requirements/specifications	Poor relations or distrust may delay approval of the solution design, which is needed to move forward	Distrust may leave stakeholders assuming no progress is being made during long work periods	Acceptance or approval of the final work product may prove contentious, requiring multiple revisions as a result of the relationship breakdown
Wishful Thinking (page 183)	Team members may not properly grasp the importance of the problem statement, affecting everything from the solution itself to stakeholder analysis	Planning is ground zero for wishful thinking, with extremely optimistic schedules and ignored risks	Overly optimistic expectations may continue here, even when it's becoming quite obvious that things aren't going well	This is where the consequences of wishful thinking are most strongly felt. Teams should focus on lessons learned

	Initiation	Planning	Execution	Closing
Analysis Paralysis (page 184)	Analysis paralysis happens mostly during this phase	Paralysis may continue here, as the team is reluctant to get started		Late delivery and missed deadlines are the most common consequences of this early-project problem
Death March (page 184)		The conditions that cause a death march (unrealistic schedule, scope that is too large) typically occur during planning	As the project becomes more and more delinquent, morale drops	Team members who “stuck it out” must be rewarded appropriately after delivery or may leave
Fire Drill (page 185)	Delays in the beginning of the project are often the cause for fire drills		As deadlines approach and are consistently not met, the chaotic nature of a fire drill can worsen	
Ineffectively Adding Resources to the Team (page 186)	If contractors or external resources are to be used, they must be closely managed from the very beginning	As part of planning efforts, contingencies can be created that identify which resources may be most appropriate if needed	Looming deadlines can make adding resources tempting, but the wrong people can make the situation even worse	
Rushing to Execution (page 186)	Early phases are skipped or rushed to get to the “real work”	Requirements/specifications efforts are skipped, designs are rushed and risks are not considered		Delayed delivery is the most common result of rushing to execution
Scope Creep (page 187)	Early on, an appropriate project scope is established	Some scope creep may occur during planning (“if we just did a bit more. . .”)	Both the team and stakeholders can add to the scope in execution	The project triangle: increased scope requires more time or resources, resulting in a late or over-budget project

Initiation	Planning	Execution	Closing
Silver Bullet (page 187)	A new tool, technology, or technique is proposed, and too little research or inflated expectations affect the project's schedule	Difficulties are encountered, and the “silver bullet” is revealed to be less productive than expected	Ultimately, the delivery date and/or budget is impacted

- All of these criteria are necessary because projects and their teams continuously **feel the downstream effects of events and decisions that have occurred beforehand**. If a pitfall has previously occurred, changing the conditions that led to it requires a concerted effort by parties at all levels, or else it's likely to occur again.
- **As project leaders**, we have the capacity to effect a change in all of these areas. One common excuse is to cite the powerlessness some project leaders feel within their larger organization—while it may not always be possible to affect the structures around you, it's important to realize that each project team can have its own “micro- culture.” Within this micro-culture are possibilities that defy the larger norm— a project that effectively manages responsibility, priority, and communication, all while not losing sight of the goals and objectives that were set at initiation.
- **Nothing speaks louder than a successful leader and team completing a successful project. As a project leader, you have the power.**



11.7 Summary and Conclusions

Summary and Conclusions

Consistently avoiding pitfalls requires the following:

- An **awareness** of both what can happen and when it's most likely to occur.
- **Diligence** and continuous **introspection**.
- Management and leadership support.
- A deliberate culture shift within the team and organization.

It's important to understand and consider the *downstream* effects that actions that a leader or team's actions and decisions can create.

11.8 Self Assessment.

Self Assessment



Activity – Pitfalls and Project Phase

- Organize into teams of 3-4. If your team were completing a project together, which pitfalls would be most likely in each of the 4 phases? Rank from most to least likely.

Pitfalls

Analysis Paralysis
Blamestorming
Death March
Fire Drill
Heroics
Scope Creep
Silver Bullet
Wishful Thinking

Project Phases

Conception / Initiation
Planning
Execution
Closing



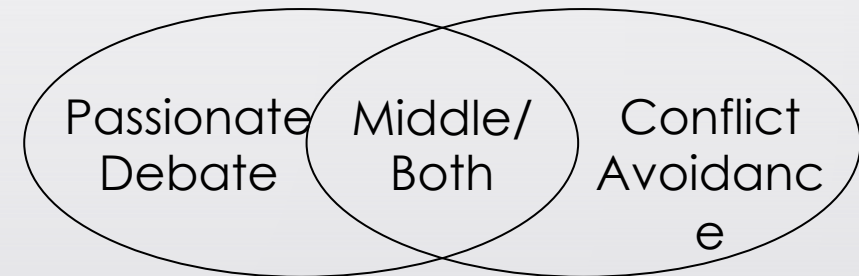
Activity - Pitfalls and Culture

- Organize into teams of 3-4. For each of the cultural elements on the right, place each pitfall into one of the three cultural categories, based on which you feel would be most likely to experience the pitfall. Briefly discuss why you believe that team's culture makes them prone to the pitfall.

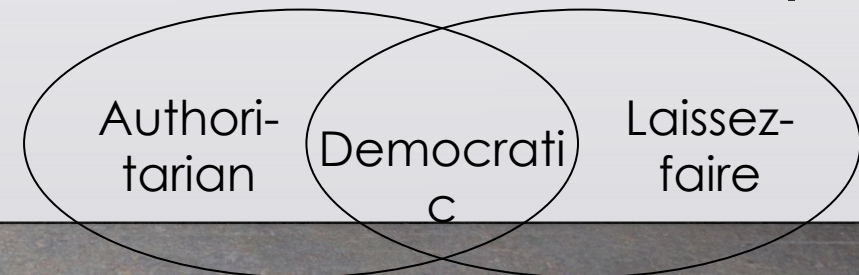
Pitfalls

- Blowhard Jamboree
- Groupthink
- Intellectual Violence
- Ineffectively Adding Resources to the Team
- Loose Cannon
- Poor Team/Stakeholder Relations
- Rushing to Execution

Cultural Element - Communication



Cultural Element - Leadership



Key Terms:

Key Terms

Antipattern: A commonly-occurring behavior that usually proves to be counterproductive to those who engage in it. The antithesis of a *pattern* (page 179).

Downstream: The parts of a project or process that occur after a given point. For example, delivery is generally *downstream* to execution. Contrasts with *upstream* (page 188).

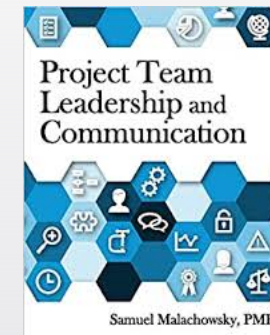
Pattern: A generally reusable solution to a common problem. The antithesis of an *antipattern* (page 179).

Thrashing: Non-productive, inefficient work effort caused by lack of organization and process (page 185).

Upstream: The parts of a project or process that occur before a given stage. For example, design is generally *upstream* to execution. Contrasts with *downstream* (page 188).

Resources:

- Project Team Leadership and Communication by [Samuel Malachowsky](#), 2018.



THANKS!