

# Nine Essential Questions To Ask When Starting A New Project

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This article was originally written by Joanna Leigh Simon of [thedigitalprojectmanager.com](http://thedigitalprojectmanager.com). It has been edited slightly for brevity, readability and relevance.

Recommended audience: new project managers

## One Thing is for Certain: Nothing is Certain

As project managers, if there's one thing we all know for certain, it's that nothing is certain.

Managing changes and unexpected variables comes with the territory – but perhaps one of the biggest challenges you'll face as a project manager is being thrown into a project that's already underway. Perhaps you just started a new job and you're being brought in on a project in progress, or another PM left suddenly and you are taking their place.

In this post, I've outlined several essential questions every project manager should ask when thrown into a new project. It is a starting point. It is NOT a substitute for official PM training. But these fundamental questions can serve to guide you toward smooth sailing when you're crunched for time! They can and should be tailored to suit any unique project or client, and can be asked in person at a meeting, virtually via email, or over the phone.

No matter how you do it, document the answers so that you can refer back to them later or share them with the team/stakeholders as needed.

## 1. What Are We Delivering?

A project might have one overarching deliverable: a website, a program, an event, a brand design. But most projects are made up of several or more phases or items meant to be completed in a certain order. All of your documentation including scope/statement of work, contract, and project plan should include a straightforward list of each item your team is expected to deliver.

For example, if you are building a website, the list may include:

- Content strategy
- Wireframes
- Design round 1
- Design round 2
- Development
- Content input
- Testing



Even though the project output is a “website,” it is your responsibility as the project manager to understand and track progress toward accomplishing each of the deliverables to ensure that they are completed in order, on time, and to specification.

**Ask your manager, team, or client to confirm that you have the full list of deliverables and nothing is missing.** Also make sure to find out what has been completed, what’s in progress, and what is yet to come.

## 2. What Are We NOT Delivering?

**It is not only important to know what IS part of the project, you should also be clear on what is NOT.**

This is one of the easiest ways to avoid scope creep, confusion, and extra work. For example, in the simple website example above, your firm is providing content strategy, but it may not mean that you are also writing all of the copy, and providing photographs, videos, and illustrations/visuals. In this case, you should ask and confirm with your stakeholders that they will be providing these types of items. Alternatively, you may ask them if they want you to add them to the scope.

There is also of course a middle ground, where perhaps you recommend another firm or a partner company to provide some additional services. Either way, it’s incredibly important to determine early on who will be responsible for all elements of the project so that two weeks before launch you’re not having a moment with your client explaining that you thought THEY were providing the copy and they assumed YOU were providing the copy.

## 3. What Is the Deadline?

Most projects have deadlines. Having a concrete amount of time within which you must complete a project helps your team stay focused, hopefully ensures that the client stays focused, and helps you figure out time and budget allocation.

**When you land on a new project, ask your stakeholders about their deadlines.**

Perhaps there is a firm deadline due to a product launch, event, or budget constraint. (I call this a “drop-dead deadline.”) Sometimes you’ll find that deadlines can be a bit more fluid (i.e. “we’d like this done sometime this summer”). Either way, as PM, you should determine when the true deadline is early on so that you can plan backwards from there.

This is also a good time to check progress against your timeline—until you arrived on the scene, was your team on track to finish by the deadline? If so, great! If not, then here is your opportunity to assess what’s wrong and go about fixing it to get back on track.

## 4. What Are the Benchmarks For Success?

This is one of the most important questions to ask at the start of any project. A goal may seem straightforward (e.g., build and launch a new website). But don’t be afraid to dig a little deeper.

**Ask your clients and stakeholders what they are they trying to achieve with this work and why they are embarking on this project. Keep that goal at the forefront of your discussions.** Knowing what success will look like can help your team stay focused and make important decisions throughout the lifespan of the project.

Coming into the project midway through its lifespan also means this is a good time for you to ask the stakeholders whether their vision/goals have changed at all since kickoff, and how you can most effectively help them reach all of their goals.

## 5. Who Is the Real Client?

Sometimes in the early phases of a project, or even before the project has fully formed, you're dealing with one or maybe a couple of individuals, but then once the work is underway all of sudden other people start coming out of the woodwork to offer feedback and make decisions.

I don't blame clients for bringing a lot of cooks into the kitchen—this could be an issue of politics, or perhaps the initial collaborator wants to get a second (or third, or fourth) opinion on the work so that they don't have to be solely responsible for success of the final product. After all, we have to remember that in many cases your clients are investing a lot of time and trust in your team and are entitled to some level of involvement in the work.

Whatever the reason, I believe that **you can manage the phenomenon of “multiplying clients” by asking at the outset: “Whose opinion matters? Who has veto power over decisions?”** Are there additional stakeholders who will be brought in to offer feedback down the line?” This way, not only can you be prepared for the frenzy, should it occur, but you can also gently remind your primary client, if necessary, that she agreed you would only be fielding notes from 2-3 people, and now that 10 people are putting in their two cents, you might be facing scope creep.

## 6. Who Is the Point of Contact?

This question may seem redundant if you are already working with a seemingly dedicated project team, but **it is important to determine who is the MAIN, in-case-of-emergency, ultimate-decision-making, point of contact on a project.**

And a bonus question: What their preferred method of communication? Email? Office phone? Cell phone? The last thing you want to be worrying about if something goes off the rails with a project is who you should reach out to and whether they'll even read your email.

## 7. Who Is Doing the Work?

Most of the project management questions on this list are ones you will be asking your clients/stakeholders, but this question is an extremely important one and it's all about your internal team.

Perhaps you are joining a project where you already know the designers, developers, etc., or perhaps you've just started at a new company where you don't know a soul! Either way, as soon as you are staffed on the project, **make sure that you have the right people on the job.**

Ask: Does everyone have the skills necessary to complete the work on time and on budget? Does anyone on the team need additional training or support? Have you filled all the roles needed, and researched contractors/freelancers if you need additional hands on deck?

## 8. Who Is the Audience for the Work?

Often, in project management, we think of each project as having two sets of stakeholders—the client or the person asking for the work to be done, and the team, or the people doing the work.

But **there is usually a third and sometimes silent group of stakeholders—the audience/consumer/recipient/user who will be interacting with, purchasing, or viewing the work when it's complete.**

The audience for your work is extremely important. Some projects will allow for surveys or research to be done to learn more about the consumer at the other end of your project work, but if not, you can still ask this question of the client, your team and yourself: who are we building this for, and what is important to them?

The answers to these project management questions will no doubt help you stay focused on what it is you are truly trying to accomplish.

## 9. What Might Get in The Way?

This is my favorite question to ask when I start a new project. It might seem a little bit messy to delve into all the potential problems you might face as a team embarking on this work, but I think **coming together to responsibly identify potential roadblocks to success is not only an exercise in humility – admitting that something is bound to go wrong at some point – but it can absolutely help you be prepared for when that moment comes.**

Hopefully you have already insured against common pitfalls—staffing problems, timeline issues, lack of budget, poorly written tech specs, etc.—but what else might get in the way of everything happening according to plan? Huddle with your team and ask your stakeholders what they foresee as potential barriers to success—and what barriers have already arisen—and then reassure everyone that you, as PM, are informed about these issues and are ready to tackle them should they come up again.

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