

DAVID ALAN CRUMP · FREE DIAGNOSTIC · 15 MINUTES

Project Recovery *Checklist*

Order out of chaos. A self-check for projects that are late, vague, over budget, or just busy without getting anywhere. The ones that look fine in the dashboards but don't feel right in the room.

48

honest checks across six leadership dimensions, plus warning signs

4

score bands, from manageable to urgent

14

day rhythm for getting a project back under control

COO / CTO-level project recovery for founders and owners who want to know what's actually going on. Not another status report. davidalancrump.com

A quick note before you dig in.

If you're reading this, there's probably one project on your mind right now. Maybe two. Something that should be further along than it is, or costing less than it is, or just feeling better than it does.

You've had the meetings. You've looked at the dashboards. You've read the status reports. And somewhere underneath all of that, you're not sure whether the project is actually moving, or just keeping busy. This won't fix anything. But by the end you should have a clearer signal of whether you have a project-management problem, a leadership problem, a vendor problem, or a hard decision you've been putting off.

Most failing projects don't blow up. They drift. The dashboards stay green, the team stays busy, and somewhere along the way confidence quietly leaves the room. The question worth asking isn't "are we tracking?" It's "are we still pointing at the right thing?"

STEP 01

Pick one project. Just one.

Not your portfolio. Not your department. One specific initiative you're worried about. Hold it in mind to the end.

STEP 03

Count your checks.

Your score updates as you go. Match it to the bands at the end. It's a signal, not a sentence.

STEP 02

Be honest with yourself.

Check anything that feels true, even partly true. Nobody else needs to see this.

STEP 04

Answer the five questions.

Write your answers down. If you can't answer one, that's the most useful thing this checklist will tell you.

What this is not. It's not an audit. An audit takes days, with interviews, document review, and a written recovery plan. This is the quick signal that tells you whether you need one. And it's not a diagnosis. A high score doesn't mean kill the project. It means you don't have enough information yet to make the next call well. The first step is getting clear, not getting busy.

Strategic direction

Late projects are expensive. Projects that finish on time and hit the wrong target are worse. This section is about whether everyone (you, the team, the vendors) still agrees on what the project is actually for.

- ☐ The business outcome the project is meant to produce is no longer clear enough for the team to make tradeoffs on their own.
- ☐ The project is still moving, but leadership is no longer confident it is still worth doing.
- ☐ Scope has grown without a clear, documented decision to expand budget, time, or team.
- ☐ Different stakeholders are working from different definitions of what "done" means.
- ☐ No one on the team can clearly explain what must be true for the project to be considered recovered or successful.
- ☐ The original business case has not been revisited since the project began, even though circumstances have changed.
- ☐ The project is being defended on the grounds of how much has already been spent, rather than what it will still deliver.

Why this matters. Direction is the cheapest thing on a project to fix and the most expensive thing to leave alone. When it's unclear, everything downstream has to work twice as hard for half the result: planning, vendor calls, status meetings.

Status reality

Status reports compress things. That's their job. The trouble is when they compress reality into a version that's easier to present than to actually act on. This section is about how much you trust what you're being told in the meetings.

Be honest about confidence, not just colour codes. Green status with falling confidence is the most common pattern I see in failing projects.

- ☐ Status reports sound acceptable, but leadership confidence is dropping rather than rising.
- ☐ The top three blockers are not named plainly in writing. They live in hallway conversations.
- ☐ The current timeline is based on hope, vendor optimism, or pressure rather than evidence from completed work.
- ☐ Bad news tends to arrive late, indirectly, or only after a deadline has already been missed.
- ☐ The dashboard looks organized, but it does not actually answer whether the business outcome is closer than it was last month.
- ☐ The same risks reappear week after week without being resolved or formally accepted.
- ☐ You have stopped asking certain questions in status meetings because the answers are predictable and unsatisfying.

Why this matters. Recovery starts with the truth. If the people running the work are the same ones reporting on it, the version that reaches you is almost always rosier than the version on the ground. Getting an honest signal back is the first piece of recovery work, every single time.

Ownership & decisions

A project is a chain of decisions. When nobody clearly owns the next one, or the same decision keeps coming back to the table, the chain breaks and everyone waits. This section is about whether your project is actually being decided, or just discussed a lot.

"We're aligned" isn't a decision. A real decision has an owner, a date, and something in writing. Anything else is just a conversation.

- ☐ No single person clearly owns the next critical decision the project needs.
- ☐ Important decisions are revisited repeatedly without ever reaching closure.
- ☐ People wait for the founder, owner, or executive before moving forward, even on decisions that should sit below that level.
- ☐ There is no current, accessible decision log or risk log, or no one is sure which one is the live version.
- ☐ Meetings produce discussion and acknowledgement, but rarely committed next actions with owners and dates.
- ☐ The escalation path is unclear, so issues either wait or jump straight to leadership.
- ☐ Senior people are spending time on decisions that the project should have made on its own a week earlier.

Why this matters. Fuzzy ownership is invisible right up until the project is late. By then it's not a process problem. It's a political one. Naming the owner of the next decision is the single most useful move you can make in recovery, and it costs you nothing.

Vendor accountability

Vendor problems almost never show up as vendor problems. They show up as fuzzy deliverables, dates that keep slipping, and weekly updates that sound reassuring but don't commit to anything you can actually hold them to. This section is about whether what's in the contract still matches what's happening on the ground.

Updates aren't commitments. A real commitment names the deliverable, the date, and what "done" looks like. Anything softer is a status update wearing a commitment costume.

- ☐ Vendors give updates but rarely make measurable, dated commitments tied to specific deliverables.
- ☐ Deliverables are described in language vague enough that it is genuinely hard to judge whether they are complete.
- ☐ The original contract, the working scope, and the actual day-to-day work no longer match each other cleanly.
- ☐ Replacing the vendor feels risky, but continuing with them feels expensive, and that tension is not being decided.
- ☐ Leadership does not know whether the vendor problem is capability (they can't), clarity (they don't know what to do), or accountability (they won't).
- ☐ The vendor controls more knowledge about the project than the client does, making any exit harder than it should be.
- ☐ Invoices are being approved out of habit or relationship rather than against measurable progress.

Why this matters. Vendor failure is one of the most common causes of project drift, and one of the least correctly diagnosed. Before you fire anyone, the honest question is whether the brief, the contract, and the way you're holding them accountable ever gave them a fair shot at succeeding. Sometimes they didn't.

Team & execution

Teams rarely fail loudly. They fail quietly: rework, half-finished threads, things people stop saying out loud, and a slow erosion of the belief that the next push will actually make a difference. This section is about whether your team is delivering, or just working.

Busy isn't the same as effective. A team running at full capacity but moving sideways is a more dangerous signal than a team that's openly behind.

- ☐ The team is visibly busy, but the volume of completed, accepted, business-meaningful work is dropping.
- ☐ Key people are redoing work that was already "finished" weeks ago.
- ☐ There is a quiet gap between what the team privately believes about the project and what they say in the room.
- ☐ One or two people are load-bearing. If they leave, take a holiday, or burn out, the project stalls hard.
- ☐ The team is operating without an honest, written prioritization. Everything is "important" and nothing is "first."
- ☐ Roles, responsibilities, and handoff points have not been re-examined since the project began, even though the work has changed shape.
- ☐ Morale is no longer something anyone talks about, which usually means it has become something no one wants to talk about.

Why this matters. Recovery isn't only a structural problem. It's an emotional one. A team that has quietly stopped believing will keep showing up and keep producing, but they'll stop bringing you the bad news you need to actually fix things. Getting belief back into the room is part of the work, whether anyone names it or not.

Money, time & trust

Every project runs on three currencies: cash, leadership attention, and credibility. You can usually find more cash. You can sometimes find more time. You almost never get credibility back once it's gone. This section is about how each of those three is holding up.

Leadership trust is the leading indicator. The moment you start quietly discounting a project's promises in your own head, the project is already in recovery territory, whether anyone has said it out loud or not.

- ☐ The project is consuming more money or executive attention than leadership expected when it was approved.
- ☐ There is no current, trusted forecast for total cost to completion. Only the original budget and the current spend.
- ☐ The timeline has slipped more than once, but the response has been to re-baseline rather than to ask why slippage keeps happening.
- ☐ Leadership has started privately discounting the project's stated dates and numbers when planning.
- ☐ The project's credibility inside the organization has dropped, even if no one has said so out loud.
- ☐ There is no agreed framework for when leadership would pause, narrow, restructure, change vendors, or stop the project.
- ☐ The cost of continuing, weighed honestly against the value still on the table, has not been recalculated recently.

Why this matters. The number-one reason struggling projects keep going is sunk cost: "we've spent too much to stop now." Recovery means evaluating the project from where you are today, looking forward. Not from where it started. The money that's already gone is gone either way.

SCORING

Compound warning signs.

Some patterns don't belong to any single section because they cut across all of them. If any of these sound familiar, count them in your final score.

- ☐ Team members are demonstrably busy, but the business result is not visibly closer than it was a month ago.
- ☐ The same issues appear in multiple meetings, in multiple weeks, without ever being resolved or formally parked.
- ☐ The project depends on assumptions about users, vendors, regulators, or integrations that no one has tested recently.
- ☐ There is a visible tension between the official status of the project and what people privately believe to be true.
- ☐ The project manager or tool administrator is tracking work, but no one with authority is challenging the direction.
- ☐ Leadership does not have a clear continue / pause / narrow / restructure / stop decision framework for this specific project.

Warning signs 0 / 6

Add up every box you checked across the six sections (out of 42) plus the warning signs above (out of 6). Match the total to the band below. It's a signal, not a sentence.

YOUR TOTAL: _____ / 48 BAND: _____

SCORE	SIGNAL	RECOMMENDED ACTION
0-8	Manageable	Keep managing. Make sure decisions, risks, and the actual business outcome stay visible. Run this again in 30 days. Drift is easier to spot with a baseline.
9-18	Watch closely	Run a focused internal review before things drift further. Get the top three blockers in writing, assign owners, and check direction with leadership before committing to anything new.
19-30	Recovery likely	You probably need an outside set of eyes: a real diagnosis, not just another opinion. Don't commit to new scope, new vendors, or new dates until you've got the truth on the table.
31+	Urgent intervention	Pause anything that's expanding. Get single-point ownership on the next decision. Run a continue / narrow / restructure / stop review inside two weeks.

The five recovery questions.

If you can answer these, you probably don't have a recovery problem. Whatever you scored, write your answers out, properly, not in your head. The goal isn't perfect answers. The goal is to find out which questions you can't answer, because those are exactly where the recovery work lives.

1 What's the real business outcome you're still trying to protect?

Not the deliverable. Not the launch date. The actual business outcome (revenue, a capability, compliance, market position) that the project was approved to produce in the first place. If three of your stakeholders can't answer this the same way, direction is your recovery work.

2 What's the single biggest blocker right now?

Not the top five. The single biggest. Forcing yourself to name one stops the room treating every issue as equally important, and it tends to surface the places where people privately disagree about what's actually wrong.

3 Who owns the next decision, and by when?

A decision without an owner is just a discussion. A decision without a deadline is just a wish. If you can't name both for the next big call on this project, it's being run by inertia.

4 What would make you pause, narrow, change vendors, or stop?

Most projects are never given an exit condition. Setting one before you need it takes the political heat out of using it later. Without one, you're committed to "keep going" by default, even when the project no longer deserves it.

5 What must be visibly different in 7 days for you to regain confidence?

Confidence comes back through small, visible signals, not big announcements. If the team can't describe what next week looks like in concrete terms, next week is going to look exactly like this one.

Five honest verdicts. "More of the same" isn't one of them.

Every struggling project eventually ends up at one of these five outcomes. Naming them out loud, in advance, turns recovery into a real decision instead of a long debate. Use this to test which one your project is actually heading toward.

VERDICT 01

Continue as-is

The project is still pointed at something valuable, leadership trust is intact, and the current plan holds up. There are issues, but they're normal project friction, not signs of something deeper.

Choose when: your score is 0-8, the business case still holds, and the team is delivering against honest dates.

VERDICT 02

Narrow scope

The outcome is still worth pursuing, but the project is trying to do too much. Cut to the smallest version that still delivers the core business result, and defer the rest until you've earned the right to come back to it.

Choose when: scope has crept, the team is overloaded, and a smaller version would still justify what you've spent.

VERDICT 03

Pause

The outcome might still be worth it, but the conditions to succeed aren't in place right now: a key role is empty, a dependency is stuck, or the business context is shifting too fast underneath you.

Choose when: continuing would mostly produce rework. Pausing is cheaper than running blind.

VERDICT 04

Restructure

The outcome is still valuable, but the way the project is being run (ownership, vendors, governance) isn't going to deliver it no matter how hard everyone works. You need to rebuild the operating model, not just rewrite the plan.

Choose when: the same problems keep recurring no matter how many times you try to fix them at the task level.

VERDICT 05

Stop

The outcome isn't worth what it'll take to get there anymore, or the assumptions the project was built on have changed. Stopping isn't failure. Continuing when nobody believes in it anymore is the failure. Choosing to stop, honestly and on the record, is one of the cleanest moves leadership can make.

Choose when: the remaining cost to deliver exceeds the remaining value, or you can't honestly explain why the project still exists.

The first 14 days of recovery.

Recovery doesn't start with a plan. It starts with a rhythm. The first two weeks are about replacing confusion with facts, and then turning those facts into decisions. Use this as a guide, not a script.

DAYS 1-3 · TRIAGE

Get to ground truth.

Pause anything that isn't essential. Talk to the people closest to the work. Map the real timeline, the real burn, the real blockers, and the real assumptions. Write down what's actually known versus what everyone's been assuming. No new commitments yet.

DAYS 4-7 · TRUTH MAP

Make the picture visible.

Produce a single one-page truth map: scope, budget, dates, vendors, dependencies, risks, missing decisions, and the top three blockers. Share it with leadership. Stop relying on the old dashboard until this version has been agreed.

DAYS 8-10 · RECOVERY OPTIONS

Put real choices on the table.

Turn the truth map into the five verdicts: continue, narrow, pause, restructure, or stop. Each one should come with cost, time, risk, and what leadership would be giving up. The point is to hand over a real decision, not a single recommendation dressed up as a choice.

DAYS 11-14 · COMMITMENT

Restart with accountability.

Confirm the verdict in writing. Reassign ownership of the next critical decisions with dates. Put a weekly recovery review in place that names blockers, decisions made, decisions deferred, and vendor commitments delivered or missed. Then start rebuilding leadership confidence one visible signal at a time.

NEXT STEPS

When to call for a second set of eyes.

You don't always need outside help. Sometimes you do. This checklist is meant to help you decide that for yourself. I'd rather you know which engagement, if any, is the right call before we ever talk.

You can probably handle this internally if:

- Your score is 0-8 and confidence is intact.
- You can name the single biggest blocker, the decision owner, and the next decision.
- Leadership still trusts the current reporting.
- You have an internal owner with real authority to act.

An outside set of eyes pays for itself if:

- Your score is 19 or higher.
- You suspect the status reports aren't telling the full story.
- The same issues keep coming back without being resolved.
- A vendor or founder bottleneck is in play and internal politics make it hard to name.

Three ways to bring in COO / CTO-level recovery.

FIRST STEP

Triage Call

\$500 / 30 min

**MONEY-BACK IF NOT A FIT
IN THE FIRST 15 MINUTES**

A working call, not a sales call.
Same-day one-page risk
snapshot and an immediate next-
step recommendation.

MOST FIT

10-Day Recovery Audit

\$5,000 / engagement

Stakeholder and vendor
interviews, full timeline and
budget review, a Truth Map with a
30/60/90-day recovery plan, and
a clear continue / narrow / pause /
restructure / stop
recommendation.

ONGOING

Fractional Advisor

\$8,500 / month

Weekly recovery meetings, a
vendor accountability framework,
decision and risk tracking, and
direct reporting to leadership.

Pick a time at calendly.com/DavidAlanCrump, or send a free inquiry at davidalancrump.com. I reply within 24 hours.