WaTech
Washington Technology Solutions

Project Management Partners Best Practices Summary

June 2025

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About this Report

This report is produced twice annually under Section 153 of [Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5950](#) by Project Management Partners (PMPs) who provide expert-level project management to major state technology projects under oversight to provide learnings that help ensure successful project outcomes across the state. This report provides independent observations and recommendations for the reporting period covering November 2024 - April 2025.

The goal of this report is to help our Project Management colleagues who work in challenging environments to implement complex technology projects. We aim to do that by providing practical solutions to common issues impacting project teams' ability to quickly make accurate decisions. Specific on-going state projects discussed throughout this paper will not be identified directly and will be referred to using an alias.
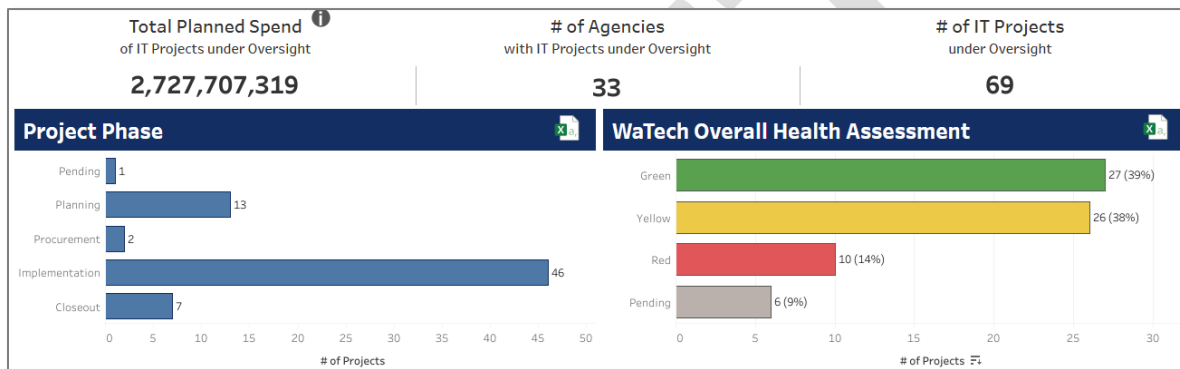

Figure 1: [WaTech Oversight Portfolio](#) as of 5/8/2025

WaTech oversight was created to ensure project success. PMPs are highly experienced professionals who partner with WaTech oversight consultants to guide projects to success throughout the project lifecycle. Best practices, project management discipline, deployment approach, human-centered design, major project deliverable review and analysis and technical architecture are just some of the areas in which PMPs provide guidance and recommendations to project teams.

Contact
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Archived Reports
Prior reports are published on WaTech's website on the [Reports and Documents](#) page. Prior videos and published material can be found on the [IT Project Resources](#) page.

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A Note on Terminology

This report discusses Washington state technology project management best practices and uses some concepts and terminology specific to our state. Definitions from the [Washington State Information Technology Project Dashboard glossary](#) will be included as a footnote for these terms as they are introduced. The following concepts are important to be aware of up front.

- **WaTech oversight**: All projects discussed in this report are under WaTech oversight. Agencies are required to submit every IT investment/project with a combined level of effort of more than $500,000 or a duration greater than 6 months to WaTech for review. WaTech will review these details to designate investments as either under project oversight or not. Projects requiring oversight will then be assigned an oversight tier.
  - See [State IT Projects | WaTech](#) for an overview of the process.
- 🟥 **Red,** 🟨 **Yellow,** 🟩 **Green**: It's common practice to use "traffic light" colors to communicate project health. We will include a colored indicator any time we discuss project health or risk level using these terms. The formal definition used by WaTech for each status is as follows:
  - 🟥 [Red](#) means that the project is in trouble. Significant problems with project controls are impacting progress, and without intervention, the project will likely miss key deadlines, go over budget, or fail to meet its goals. Immediate action is needed to get back on track.
  - 🟨 [Yellow](#) means that the project has some issues or risks that need attention. While progress is still being made, there are concerns that existing project controls could cause delays or cost overruns if not addressed. The team is actively managing these issues, but the situation should be watched closely.
  - 🟩 [Green](#) means the project is on track. Work is proceeding as planned, milestones are being met, and there are no major issues affecting scope, schedule, or budget. Everything is moving forward as expected.

Executive Summary

Decision making is a constant process within technology projects. Research from The Standish Group (2022) found that project teams can expect to make one decision for every $1,000 spent on labor costs. WaTech is currently providing oversight to over $2.5 billion in project spending, meaning that these projects can expect to deal with many important hundreds of thousands of decisions during their lifecycle. The effectiveness of this decision-making process—and the associated risk management—depends heavily on agency culture and leadership at the executive sponsor, director, and deputy director levels. Without strong leadership support and without a willingness to actively back project leadership and foster a culture that aligns with project strategy, efforts to improve decision making and risk management are likely to fail. This breakdown is evident in agencies where cultural resistance undermines project direction, resulting in delayed or poor decisions and weakened project outcomes. The average amount of time (measured in hours) that a project team spends determining a new course of action in response to a change is known as *Decision Latency*. On average, a project team with a high decision latency will spend five times as long on a decision as a team with a low decision latency. Higher decision latency also increases the risk of revisiting any given decision by up to 40%, turning 20 decisions into 28. Combined, these factors can increase a project's total labor costs by almost 50%.

Figure 2: Decision Latency Impacts on Project Result and Budget

This report covers three best practices impacting decision latency based on an independent review of ongoing projects under WaTech oversight. We'll cover challenges common to Washington state technology projects and discuss the impact they have on projects, recommending project management best practices to help get those projects back to ■Green. We'll then present a case study showcasing those best practices in a successful public sector technology project and learn what we can from their success. We'll conclude each section with the metrics and outcomes a project can expect, along with a formal recommendation.

The practices covered in this report are:

Best Practice: Structured Decision-Making Models

- Project A[1], a multi-agency system modernization effort involving dozens of systems and more than 30 steering committee members, has struggled to implement a decision-making strategy capable of managing its high decision latency. Despite several attempts over the past few years, success has been limited. In this section, we'll review the steps Project A has taken to reduce decision latency, along with lessons learned from the **Queensland Parliamentary Service's** implementation of a similarly complex back-office modernization project.

Best Practice: Proactive Risk Mitigation

- Traditional risk management often treats risk as a reporting exercise, identifying issues only after they occur. In this reactive model, teams are frequently unprepared for emerging problems, resulting in rushed responses, poor decisions, and a reliance on crisis management. The pressure to act quickly can cause communication breakdowns, missed details, and short-term fixes that further disrupt scope, schedule, and budget. In this section, we'll review an analysis of risks affecting Washington state technology projects and explore strategies for proactively mitigating them. We'll also examine how the **Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR)**, the technology agency for the state of Texas, successfully applied these strategies to address escalating cyberattacks and ransomware threats.

Best Practice: Set SMART Goals

- Projects, especially those in the public sector, often have difficulty in measuring and communicating their effectiveness and value. We'll discuss how state agencies can communicate the impact of their projects to both state leadership and residents by setting **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound (SMART) goals. We'll share practical goal setting methods and provide insight from how *The City of Boston* used SMART goals to measure the impact of a revamp to its municipal service request system.

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[1] Alias for active project. See [About this Report.](#)

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Best Practice: Structured Decision-Making Models

Background

In large, complex projects, especially those involving multiple agencies or vendors, decisions can become one of the biggest obstacles to progress. Teams spend valuable time circling around the same questions, unsure who is responsible for making the call or even if a decision has already been made. As decision latency grows, so does frustration. This is where a structured decision-making model becomes a powerful tool.

> **"Even seemingly trivial decisions deplete us."**
> *Brad Stulberg*

When implemented well, a structured decision-making model doesn't just solve one-off problems, it changes the way teams think about decisions. It cuts down on rework, eliminates vague approvals, and helps leaders focus their time where it matters most, turning what is often one of the weaker parts of a project into a strength. We'll review the impact implementing a structured decision-making model has had on two system modernization projects, one in Washington state and the other in Queensland, Australia.

Observations

Project A[2], a multi-agency system modernization project currently under WaTech Oversight, has struggled to move from the planning phase into implementation. With a scope that includes dozens of complex, high-risk systems across multiple state agencies and a steering committee with more than 30 voting members, Project A has experienced chronic decision latency. Although there have been periods of progress, the lack of a consistent decision-making structure has often led to delays and rework, causing multiple setbacks and significant frustration among project sponsors and other interested parties.

Impact

The lack of a structured decision-making framework has far-reaching implications for Project A's health and trajectory. Without clarity on roles and responsibilities, important decisions are often delayed, duplicated, or left unresolved. Team members find themselves revisiting previously discussed issues, unsure whether earlier agreements remain valid or a new consensus is required. Health assessments from both external Quality Assurance (QA) and WaTech Oversight Consultants have consistently rated governance, integration, and schedule risk as moderate to high with a common theme being the difficulty Project A has translating strategic direction into actionable plans. As a result, even with active engagement from executive sponsors and reasonable funding stability, Project A has been ◼Red for 14 of the past 15 months.

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[2] Alias for active project. See About this Report.

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Getting to 🟩Green

Recognizing these challenges, the team implemented the **R**ecommend **A**gree **P**erform **I**nput **D**ecide (RAPID) structured decision-making model to bring structure and discipline to its unruly governance model. The goal is to reduce confusion, speed up decisions, and ensure accountability with clearly defined roles as seen in figure 3. RAPID helps organizations define who does what in the decision-making process, reducing ambiguity and delays, and lowering decision cost. It is particularly useful in cross-functional or multi-agency projects, with many high-stakes decisions, and situations where decisions get stalled due to unclear authority. It is not a workflow but a decision-rights framework. RAPID doesn't prescribe how work gets done; it clarifies how decisions are made.

RAPID decision-making needs more than just a kickoff. It needs regular support to work. As part of their implementation of RAPID, Project A maintains a shared decision tracker to log and publish decisions, specify role assignments, and document decision-making rationale. Since implementing RAPID, Project A has made updates to key project deliverables including a revised roadmap and budget, updates that had previously taken up to a year to complete.

Recommend
The person or group responsible for developing a proposal or course of action. They gather input, evaluate options, and present a recommendation.

Agree
Individuals who must formally approve the recommendation before it can move forward. Their agreement is necessary but they do not have the final say.

Perform
The people who will carry out or implement the decision once it's made.

Input
Interested parties who provide relevant data, expertise, or opinions to inform the recommendation. They do not make the decision but can influence it.

Decide
The one person with final authority to make the decision. They weigh input, consider recommendations, and make the call.

Figure 3: RAPID role definitions

Oversight assessments conducted in Q2 this year have noted improvements in overall project health; Project A is still 🟥Red. To support their journey to 🟩Green, the PMP team is engaged with project managers from Project A to support their continued adoption and use of RAPID. We will report on their progress and provide an update in the December edition of this report as well as sharing lessons learned along the way.

Case Study: Queensland Parliamentary Service

The Queensland Parliamentary Service (QPS) aimed to modernize its back-office systems, spanning finance, HR, procurement, and IT operations. This initiative sought to enhance services for 93 Members of Parliament, departmental employees, and parliamentary committees. Much like Project A, QPS faced complexity in both technology and governance. Multiple branches of government, administrative units, and vendor partners had overlapping influence in decision-making, and the absence of clear authority structures led to frequent delays and decision reversals. Early project assessments flagged decision latency as a primary risk threatening to derail the implementation schedule and stall contract negotiations.

To address this, QPS introduced the RAPID decision-making model, adapting it to their specific governance environment. Critical to their success was the early identification of "stuck" decisions and the assignment of a cross-functional working group to resolve them. Each high-impact decision, whether around vendor onboarding, system configuration standards, or timeline adjustments, was
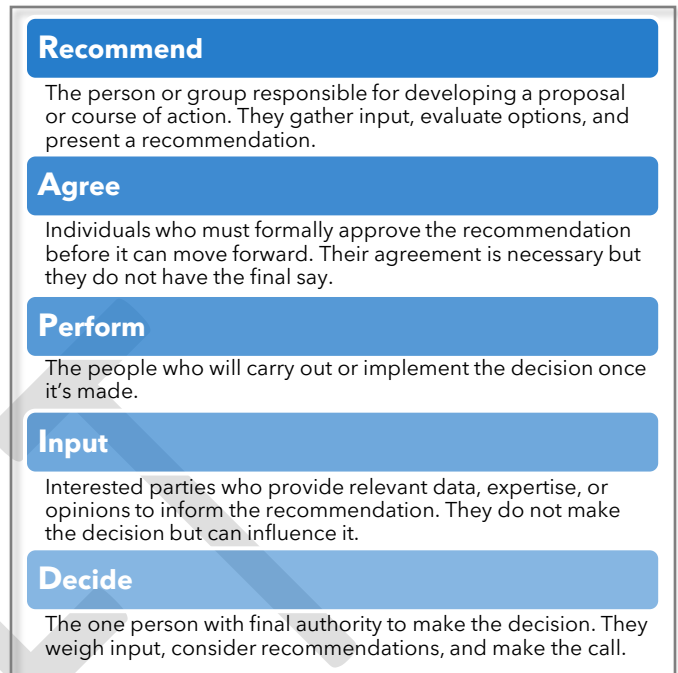
assigned explicit RAPID roles, with a single person always assigned as the "Decider". RAPID was not implemented in isolation; it was paired with a centralized decision log, lightweight decision templates, and periodic reviews to realign roles as the project matured.

The results were immediate and measurable. QPS reduced the average turnaround time for high-priority decisions from over 30 days to less than 10 (OIC Annual Report, 2024). Satisfaction with the governance process improved, and the project recovered several weeks of schedule variance by reducing redundant discussions and minimizing escalations. More importantly, the framework created a shared culture of accountability. By clarifying who had a voice, who had responsibility, and who had final authority, RAPID gave teams the structure they needed to act with confidence even in the most politically complex environments.

For Project A, QPS offers a valuable reference point: RAPID is not only effective in theory but scalable in practice. The key lesson from their success lies not in the tool itself, but in how rigorously it was adopted, documented, and reinforced at every level of decision-making. If the current project follows that same path, it can unlock similar gains in alignment, speed, and trust.

Outcomes

The implementation of a decision-making model has consistently led to meaningful improvements in project performance across large, complex state technology initiatives. In projects experiencing high decision latency, these models help bring clarity, speed, and structure to decision-making. The most successful implementations pair RAPID with a decision tracker and regular role reviews as part of their risk management plan, creating an agile governance system that evolves with the project.

Across projects that have adopted structured decision-making models, the following common outcomes and performance metrics are often observed:

Decision Latency	30-50% decrease in the time it takes to move from recommendation to final decision (Rogers & Blenko, 2006).
Rework	40% decrease in rework due to fewer decisions being reversed or re-litigated due to unclear authority or missed input (Blenko, Mankins, & Rogers, 2010).
On-Time Delivery	Projects using decision-making models have less difficulty aligning decision timing with budgeting, vendor onboarding, and schedule baselining (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2019).
Sponsor Confidence	Oversight and QA reviewers often note moderate to significant improvements in governance structure, schedule confidence, and sponsor alignment within 1-2 reporting cycles post-implementation (Gartner Research, 2017).
Decision Traceability	The use of decision logs and trackers increases the percentage of major decisions that are documented, role-assigned, and archived, from informal or ad hoc rates to over 90% (PMI, 2016).

Table 1: Structured Decision-Making Outcomes

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Playbook: Implement a Structured Decision-Making Model

Understand the RAPID Model

- **Recommend**: Identify who will propose a course of action.
- **Agree**: Identify who needs to agree before a decision can move forward.
- **Perform**: Determing who will make it happen.
- **Input**: Figure out who are the experts and ask them what they think.
- **Decide**: Identify the **single** person with final authority to make the decision.

Identify Key Decisions

- List major decisions your team or project needs to make (e.g., vendor selection, tech platform, rollout strategy).
- Prioritize based on impact, urgency, or complexity.

Assign RAPID Roles for Each Decision

- Map each decision to specific individuals or roles for R, A, P, I, and D.
- Ensure the *Decider* is singular to avoid ambiguity.
- Use a table or matrix to track assignments.

Communicate the Model

- Educate project sponsors and team members on RAPID.
- Clarify their roles and responsibilities and address any concerns about authority, accountability, or influence.
- Update project charters and other relevant documentation.

Facilitate the Process

- Encourage the **Recommender** to gather **Input** early and be thorough.
- Ensure that **Agree** members provide timely feedback.
- Make sure that **Performers** have the details needed to actually do the work.
- Keep the **Decider** informed but independent to resolve trade-offs confidently.
- Time box discussions to limit bikeshedding.

Document and Track Decisions

- Record the following details on all decisions made:
  - The decision made.
  - Who fulfilled each role.
  - Supporting documentation.
  - Decision rationale.
  - Helps with accountability and lessons learned.

Evaluate and Refine

- After major decisions or projects, review how well RAPID worked.
- Adjust role assignments or communication practices as needed.

Keys to Success

Use something: Choose a framework that works best for your project. You don't have to use RAPID.

Stay flexible: This is a decision tool, not a strict set of rules.

But not too flexible: Maintain a regular schedule for reviews and decision meetings.

Don't skip the "I": Include expert input to make better decisions.

Avoid "role creep": Limit the number of people influencing the final decision. Support a single, independent decision maker to increase success.

Time box: Set a time limit for decisions. Use a timer in meetings.

Be consistent: Use your decision register in meetings, planning sessions, and status reports. Make sure project members are familiar with it.

Save time, use our templates!

- [Project Team RACI Matrix](#)
- [RAPID Decision-Making Worksheet](#)

Best Practice: Proactive Risk Management

Background

Proactive risk management practices help reduce unpredictability and allow projects to deliver on time and within budget. Few things are more dreaded by a project manager than having to delay a major project milestone due to an unknown risk. While no one relishes focusing on the many ways that a project can fail, it's far better to have reliable contingencies in place when the inevitable challenges arise. The more risks a project has, the more decisions it will face, which can lead a project into a spiral of rework, delays and budget overruns. We'll look at risk management approaches across troubled projects in the past year and compare them with successful projects using a proactive approach to risk management.

> **"You can't manage what you don't understand. The earlier risks are identified, the cheaper they are to address."**
> *PMBOK® Guide, 6th Edition*

Observations

WaTech PMPs performed an analysis of projects under oversight during the 12-month period from April 2024 to March 2025 and identified common themes among struggling projects. Of the 34 projects that were reported as 🔴Red overall at least once, Oversight Consultants explicitly highlighted risk management in 88% of them.

Project risks clustered around the following themes:

- **Schedule** (*reported by 65% of projects)*
  - Projects lack realistic or finalized timelines. Delays cause cascading impacts across phases and deliverables.
- **Budget** *(reported by 62% of projects)*
  - Risks from unapproved or incomplete funding plans, late-stage reprioritizations, and unclear alignment between scope and available resources.
- **Vendor** *(reported by 41% of projects)*
  - Inadequate vendor coordination, unclear deliverables, and reliance on external fixes.
- **Resourcing** (*reported by 32% of projects)*
  - Persistent resource contention and unvalidated staffing plans jeopardize delivery timelines, especially where SMEs[3] or PMs are limited.

- *"No firm Go-Live date or scope freeze… high risk of slippage or failure."*
- *"Resource contention impacting project schedule and future viability."*
- *"Risk continues to be high due to onboarding and scope alignment."*
- *"The project is high risk with delays and lack of project planning."*
- *"Assessments identify moderate and high risks that may impact the project's ability to achieve desired results."*
- *"New PM onboarding and alignment delays compound risk across core activities."*
- *"Resource risk remains... PM resource will be shifting next month."*
- *"The project has experienced turnover"*
- *"...increased risk due to continued delay in defining scope of work in Pre-Procurement Phase."*
- *"Delays in completing some activities a high risk to schedule... integration testing has been delayed."*

Figure 4: Selected quotations from project assessments

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[3] Subject Matter Expert. Generally, a state employee with deep experience in agency business processes.

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Impact

These project narratives reveal a consistent pattern of unaddressed risks, resulting in delayed planning, unclear scope, and unstable schedules. Recurrent issues include inherited scope creep, late-stage onboarding of key personnel, and ongoing changes to technical or business requirements without corresponding realignments in time and budget. Assessments report misalignment between teams, late recognition of resource constraints, and insufficient mitigation planning, all contributing to compounded delivery risks.

These findings underscore the need for more proactive risk management practices. Projects frequently escalate to ■Red due to conditions that could have been identified and mitigated with proactive risk management practices. Pre-mortem planning, regular cross-functional risk reviews, and the use of risk tracking tools such as RAID[4] logs help ensure timely mitigation and limit disruptions to scope, schedule, and budget. Projects experiencing the most severe distress often lacked these proactive measures, leading to reactive firefighting instead of strategic course correction.

These scope changes have a quantifiable impact on project budgets. According to an analysis of 5,392 technology projects in the Journal of Management Information Systems (2022), proactive risk management practices have a significant impact on total project cost. Projects without proactive risk management showed a wider distribution of cost overruns, with 42% of projects exceeding 100%, and 12% with cost overruns of 300% to 500%. The average cost overrun in this group was 101%, meaning these projects typically more than doubled their budgets.

In contrast, projects with proactive risk management were heavily clustered in the 0-50% overrun range, with no projects experiencing cost overruns beyond 300%.

Figure 5: Correlation of risk management practices to budget overruns.

The average cost overrun for this group was only 36%, representing a 65% reduction in overrun severity compared to unmanaged projects.

Overall, the findings suggest that while some teams are beginning to embed structured risk practices, a significant portion still treat risk as a reporting issue rather than a planning tool. Expanding the use of proactive risk frameworks and decision-making roles will be key to reducing project volatility and supporting more consistent project status recovery and reducing decision latency.

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[4] The **R**isks, **A**ction Items, **I**ssues, and **D**ecision (RAID) Log provides a single tool for project managers to document project-related decisions, track the status of action items and issues, and document known project risks. See the WaTech RAID template for more detail.

Getting to ■Green

Effective risk planning is a foundational element of sound project governance and control, not just a perfunctory reporting requirement. All projects under major IT Project oversight are expected to integrate risk management into their core operating processes, ensuring that potential threats to scope, schedule, cost, and quality are identified early and managed proactively throughout the project lifecycle.

Projects should establish a regular cadence of risk identification and response activities. Best practices recommend holding both incremental and full risk reviews to ensure that emerging risks are actively identified, assessed, and addressed. Incremental reviews are generally held on a bi-weekly or weekly basis and cover newly logged risks and risks that are currently in mitigation. Full risk reviews are tied to major project milestones and include a review of all items on the risk log. Project sponsors and steering committees play a key role in ensuring that risk management practices are not just definitions in the project charter but also operationalized through active use. We recommend that project teams track and publish the top 3-5 open risks in their regular project status reports and health assessments.

In addition, we recommend that projects conduct pre-mortem planning workshops[5] prior to the start of each major phase or deliverable. Pre-mortem risk planning is a proactive technique used by project teams to anticipate potential failures before they occur. Unlike traditional post-mortem reviews (conducted reactively after a failure), pre-mortems are conducted at the start or midpoint of a project or phase to surface hidden risks and vulnerabilities. Pre-mortems promote critical thinking, challenge assumptions, and expose latent risks that may not surface in standard planning discussions.

Case Study: Texas Department of Information Resources

Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) offers a model of proactive risk governance, particularly in high-stakes domains like cybersecurity. After a wave of high-profile cyber incidents rocked state and health agencies across the U.S., the Texas DIR executed a $171 million project to fortify the state's cybersecurity infrastructure (2023). This wasn't just about installing better software; it was a strategic investment in early detection, real-time monitoring, and statewide incident response capabilities. The goal was simple but powerful: plan for the worst before it happens.

The program's implementation marked a cultural shift toward resilience and readiness. Risk wasn't treated as hypothetical, it was mapped, modeled, and managed in advance. Agencies across Texas reported stronger compliance with federal standards, fewer system vulnerabilities, and a renewed confidence in their digital environments. More importantly, the initiative demonstrated the tangible value of proactive risk management in the public sector: when you prepare early, you build resilient systems that can adapt, respond, and endure.

The key difference is not simply that DIR had more resources, it's that it treated risk as a primary driver of governance and not just a box that needs to be checked. DIR's approach embedded risk into its decision-making infrastructure. Where many troubled projects lack clarity on who owns mitigation

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[5] See the Sample Agenda in Appendix B for a detailed look at how to run a Pre-mortem.

decisions, DIR aligned response protocols with named decision-makers, enabling swift and coordinated action across vendors, agencies, and executive offices.

Outcomes

When risk is managed proactively, projects experience fewer delays, increased risk recovery, and decreased decision latency. With defined trigger points and a clear decision strategy, teams can act decisively when risks emerge rather than getting caught in cycles of escalation and reaction. This responsiveness prevents small issues from spiraling into project failure.

Proactive risk management also leads to more realistic planning and budgeting. Teams that account for uncertainty through contingency buffers, structured risk assessment, and scenario planning are better positioned to manage change without disrupting project scope, schedule, or budget. These projects are also more likely to preserve scope and quality, as they've already identified fallback options that don't require last-minute trade-offs.

The following outcomes and performance improvements are commonly observed:

Decision Latency	40-60% faster mitigation when risk owners and triggers are pre-defined especially when paired with structured frameworks like RAPID to support timely mitigation decisions (Blenko, Mankins, & Rogers, 2010).
Rework	50% decrease in scope rework or replanning after early scenario exercises (The Standish Group, 2022).
On-Time Delivery	30-45% decrease in unplanned schedule slips due to early identification and mitigation of high-impact risks. (PMI, 2019).
Sponsor Confidence	20-30% increase in confidence ratings in project status reporting after embedding risk into governance cycles enabling leaders proactively address project risks. (US GAO, 2021)
Risk Recovery	20-40% decrease in recovery time through use of contingency strategies (Texas DIR, 2023).
Lower Cost Overruns	Projects with proactive risk management practices have an average cost of 36% compared to an average cost overrun of 101% for projects with reactive risk management practices (Bent, et al., 2022).

Table 2: Proactive Risk Management Outcomes

Playbook: Implement Proactive Management

Establish a Risk Management Plan

- Define how risks will be identified, assessed, monitored, and controlled.
- Assign clear roles and responsibilities.
- Align the plan with project scope, budget, and timeline.

Identify Potential Risks Early

- Brainstorm with end users, leadership, and technical teams.
- Review lessons learned for common risk areas (e.g., integration, data migration, vendor issues).

Analyze and Prioritize Risks

- Assess likelihood and impact of each risk. Label them as Low, Medium, High or numerical scoring.
- Assign owners for each major risk.

Develop Risk Mitigation Strategies

- Define preventive actions (reduce likelihood) and contingency plans (reduce impact).
- Budget time and resources for this! It doesn't help if it's just a spreadsheet.

Communicate Transparently

- Keep interested parties informed about key risks and actions. Report progress on mitigation actions.
- Avoid downplaying or hiding risks. Early awareness builds trust.
- Integrate risk status reviews into regular project meetings.

Review and Update Regularly

- Review active risks regulary, at least once a month.
- Fully reassess risks at each project phase or milestone.
- Remove resolved risks, update on-going risks, and add new ones.

Capture Lessons Learned

- Conduct a post-project risk review.
- Document what went well and what didn't.
- Add any effective mitigartions to the lessons learned register.

Keys to Success

Keep it easy: Encourage teams to report risks early without making it burdensome.

Encourage ownership: Reward team members who identify risks. They shouldn't be afraid to speak up.

Avoid checkbox risk logs: Don't just list risks and forget them. Include your risk log in communication plan.

Keep everyone informed: Share your RAID log. Project leaders should know about high-likelihood/high-impact risks and their mitigation plans.

Balance safety and risk: Calculated risks drive innovation. Be cautious, but don't be afraid to take risks when they make sense.

Save time, use our templates!

Risk & Issue Management Plan

Pre-mortem Workshop Agenda
RAID Log

Best Practice: Set SMART Goals

Background

Projects, especially those in the public sector, often have difficulty measuring and communicating their effectiveness and value. SMART goals provide a clear, structured approach to defining success, helping project teams align their work with strategic outcomes, track progress with measurable indicators, and communicate value with greater confidence. In this section, we'll cover tools and techniques that will help teams demonstrate the value of their work, quickly identify areas for improvement, and make better products based on concrete data.

> **"You can't manage what you can't measure, and you can't improve what you don't understand."**
> Peter Drucker

Observations

SMART goals translate project objectives into clear, measurable metrics, making it easier to track progress, assess impact, and communicate outcomes. To understand how project teams are using metrics to communicate success, WaTech PMPs reviewed project status reports submitted between January 2023 and October 2024 and published via the State Oversight Dashboard. A total of 152 distinct projects under WaTech Oversight submitted reports during this period, including both WaTech assessments and project self-assessments.

Of these narratives, only seven projects made explicit reference to performance metrics. The metrics that were cited were narrowly focused and project-specific, typically related to resource usage, budget tracking, or schedule adherence. While these indicators are useful for monitoring delivery health, they primarily answer the question, "Is the project progressing as planned?" and not the more critical "Is the project achieving meaningful impact?"

Value-oriented metrics that describe long-term benefits to agencies or the public, such as reduced maintenance costs, improved user satisfaction, higher adoption rates, or enhanced service delivery, were entirely absent. These types of indicators are essential for demonstrating whether a technology investment is delivering real, measurable value.

Impact

Without a consistent framework for defining and tracking success, projects risk prioritizing activity over outcomes. While deliverables may be completed on time or within budget, their potential impact on Washington state residents remain unclear. The lack of goal-backed metrics affects more than WaTech's ability to detect when progress is off track. It makes it difficult to measure whether projects are delivering benefits to Washington state residents.

The absence of measurable goals can weaken support for the project during budget or gate review. In contrast, projects with clear metrics, such as reduction in data entry time, increased data accuracy, or system uptime, are better able to justify investments and drive adoption.

Getting to 🟩Green

The SMART framework provides a structured method to remove ambiguity from a project's goals. Rather than vague aspirations like "improve system performance" or "enhance user experience," SMART goals require teams to clearly define what success looks like, by when, and under what conditions. This clarity empowers teams to focus their efforts, prioritize resources, and identify blockers more quickly. SMART goal setting encourages aligning project objectives with broader state policy direction. In technology projects that span across multiple agencies, this keeps project tied to public value, not just deliverables.

High Level Goal	SMART Goal	Why This Works
Improve reporting.	Implement automated financial reports for monthly closeout.	**Specific:** Clarifies what will improve and how.
Better team collaboration.	Increase cross-department task completion rate from 60% to 85%.	**Measurable:** Defines success in quantifiable terms.
Eliminate all system issues.	Reduce ticket backlog by 40% over 6 weeks.	**Achievable:** Sets a realistic, attainable benchmark.
Run more trainings.	Train project managers on SMART goal setting to improve project alignment.	**Relevant:** Aligns to strategic needs, not just activity.
Fix the vendor process.	Update vendor onboarding policy and roll out changes by Sept 30.	**Time-bound:** Provides a clear deadline.

Figure 6: Examples developing high level goals into SMART goals

From a risk management perspective, SMART goals function as early warning systems. Underperforming metrics signal emerging issues, giving project managers the opportunity to act before delays or defects compound.

Goals bring structure, focus, and intentionality to complex projects, ensuring that every project deliverable is driving towards a shared definition of success. SMART goal setting reduces uncertainty and increases the odds of delivering on time, within scope, and with real impact for our end users.

Case Study: Boston 311

The Boston 311 program is a citizen-focused digital service initiative launched by the City of Boston to allow residents to report non-emergency issues like potholes, graffiti, and broken streetlights quickly and easily through a mobile app. The team behind the initiative knew that clarity and accountability would be key to success. Instead of vague goals, they set SMART goals: "Launch the app by July 1," "reach 5,000 downloads," and "achieve 80% user satisfaction." These goals helped focus the team's efforts, kept interested parties aligned, and created a finish line that everyone could rally around.

The result was a streamlined rollout, powered by agile development and consistent feedback loops. Residents adopted the app quickly, and city departments reported faster issue resolution and more accurate reporting. Beyond its practical impact, Boston 311 showed how thoughtful planning, and well-structured goals can transform public sector technology from a bureaucratic initiative into a tool that genuinely improves people's lives. The project not only met its SMART goals, but it also set a new standard for how cities can use digital tools to connect with customers.

These goals shaped how technical vendors were selected, how workflows were redesigned, and how data dashboards were built. Importantly, Boston published these goals on a public dashboard and used them to report progress to both city leadership and the public, turning internal metrics into community accountability tools.

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Outcomes

Boston's success wasn't just measured by project metrics, but by tangible improvements delivered to its citizens. By setting goals that were **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound, the city clearly described what success looked like to both the project team and the public. As a result, teams stayed focused, leaders made faster, more informed decisions, and their work was tracked in ways that were meaningful to residents. Applied in Washington, this same approach would help shift the focus from activity to impact. Instead of reporting that a system was "planning" for many years, teams could track how much it improved turnaround time for service requests, reduced manual effort, or increased resident satisfaction. These are outcomes that agency leaders and oversight bodies can rally around and that enable more effective governance.

Most notably, implementing SMART goals would have a direct impact on decision latency, a common challenge in large, cross-agency efforts. In many current projects, decision-making is delayed because interested parties lack a clear, agreed-upon definition of what success looks like. Without this clarity, decisions are revisited, escalated, or postponed. SMART goals remove this ambiguity. When everyone is aligned on a measurable, time-bound target, decisions become faster and more defensible. Trade-offs are easier to assess. Risks are easier to frame. Accountability becomes clearer.

SMART goals give decision-makers the evidence they need to act. Leaders can adjust scope, reallocate resources, or provide meaningful feedback during the gating process. Rather than waiting for problems to escalate, project teams and sponsors can use metrics aligned with their SMART goals as early warning signals, triggering timely interventions.

Implementing SMART goals in Washington state shifts the narrative from "Are we busy?" to "Are we making a difference?" They improve decision latency by replacing debate with data. They create a shared contract around outcomes, sharpen focus on what matters, and give leaders the confidence to make timely, informed choices.

Decision Latency	25-40% decrease in decision latency for scope, budget, and delivery decisions when guided by SMART goals (Blenko, Mankins, & Rogers, 2010).
Rework	20-35% fewer instances of scope revisions due to clearer up-front definitions (PMI, 2020).
On-Time Delivery	20-30% increase in milestone schedule accuracy, meaning projects with SMART goals are less likely to miss a delivery (The Standish Group, 2022).
Sponsor Confidence	20-30% increase in sponsor satisfaction and funding support during reviews (US GAO, 2021).
Outcome Based Metrics	Projects using SMART frameworks report 2-3× more value-based metrics (IBM Center for the Business of Government, 2013).

Table 3: SMART Goal Setting Outcomes

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Playbook: Implement SMART Goals

Educate Your Team on SMART Goals

- Explain what SMART stands for and why it improves clarity, accountability, and performance.
- Use examples to show the difference between vague goals and SMART goals.

Define the Objective or Area of Focus

- What are you trying to achieve? Start with a general goal related to your project or strategy.
- Example: *"Improve citizen experience"* or *"Launch a by the end of Q3."*

Break It Down Using SMART Criteria

- **Specific**: What exactly needs to be done?
- **Measurable**: How will success be measured?
- **Achievable**: Is the goal realistic with current resources?
- **Relevant**: Does this align with broader strategic priorities?
- **Time-bound**: What is the deadline or time frame?

Write the SMART Goal Statement

- Combine the elements into one clear, concise goal.
- Example: *"By July 1, launch a 311 app that achieves 5,000 downloads and 80% user satisfaction"*

Assign Ownership and Accountability

- Identify who is responsible for each goal.
- Define supporting roles (developers, analysts, vendors)
- Align goals with individual or team performance metrics.

Track Progress and Review Regularly

- Publish your metrics openly and incorporate them into regular reporting.
- Schedule regular check-ins with project sponsors and other interested parties.
- If project conditions change, gauge and communicate impacts to scope, schedule, or budget.

Celebrate Wins and Reflect on Outcomes

- Recognize and reward teams when goals are achieved.
- Conduct post-project reviews to capture lessons learned.
- Use those insights to refine future goals.

Keys to Success

Avoid goal overload: Focus on 3-5 meaningful SMART goals per project or team.

Connect to metrics: Tie your SMART goals to metrics tracked by leadership.

Use collaborative tools: Track goals using SharePoint, DevOps, Jira, or even a shared spreadsheet.

Avoid vague language: Don't use vague, misleading, or ambiguous terms that make statements seem more convincing without solid evidence

- **"Some experts say…"** → Specify which experts.
- **"It is widely believed that…"** → Specify who believes this
- **"Will increase…"** → Specify by how much and over what period

Save time, use our templates!

SMART Goal Worksheet

Conclusion

Washington's state technology projects face increasing complexity, scale, and public scrutiny, making timely, high-quality decision-making more critical than ever. This report highlights how decision latency can be impacted by unstructured decision-making, reactive risk management, and vague goals. Metrics remain persistent challenges across the IT project portfolio. However, it also demonstrates that practical, proven solutions exist that provide real results.

The independent Project Management Partners recommend the implementation of the practices covered in this report: right-sizing decision authority using the RAPID framework or a similar decision-making model, implementing proactive risk management practices, and developing SMART goals linking project outputs to meaningful outcomes. These approaches, supported by evidence and industry research, consistently lead to decreased decision latency, reduced delays and budget overruns, decreased friction with oversight bodies, and greater alignment between projects and agency missions.

The path forward requires more than tools. It requires a change in focus: from reporting progress to demonstrating value, from reacting to planning, and from vague statements to SMART goals. By embracing these practices, Washington's technology projects can improve delivery and ensure every dollar invested translates into a lasting impact for residents.

Contact
Questions regarding this report and other project management best practices can be directed to the PMP team at watechdlprojectmgtpartners@watech.wa.gov*.*

Archived Reports
Prior reports are published on WaTech's website on the Reports and Documents page. Prior videos and published material can be found on the IT Project Resources *page.*

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Appendices

Appendix A - Templates

RAPID Decision-Making Worksheet

RAPID Decision-Making Worksheet			
Topic	*[What's the topic of this decision?]*		
Summary	Date Created		
	Deadline		
	Context/Background		
Role Assignments			
Role	Person Assigned	Responsibilities	Notes
Recommend	*[Assignee]*	Research options, analyze risks/benefits, propose a solution or plan.	
Agree	*[Assignee]*	Provides formal sign-off. Often a project sponsor.	
Perform	*[Assignee]*	Execute the decision.	
Input	*[Assignee]*	Provides insight, data, or expertise to inform the recommendation.	
Decide	*[Assignee]*	Makes the decision and is accountable for the outcome.	
Key Inputs Considered		*(add rows as needed)*	
Input	Description		Additional Detail
[Input 1]	*[Describe the input. How was it considered?]*		
[Input 2]	*[Describe the input. How was it considered?]*		
[Input 3]	*[Describe the input. How was it considered?]*		
Risks		*(add rows as needed)*	
Risk	Description		Mitigation Strategy
[Risk 1]	*[What is the risk?]*		*[How will the risk be mitigated?]*
[Risk 2]	*[What is the risk?]*		*[How will the risk be mitigated?]*
[Risk 3]	*[What is the risk?]*		*[How will the risk be mitigated?]*
Options Considered		*(add rows as needed)*	
Risk	Details		Additional Detail
[Option 1]	*[Option Detail; provide benefits, drawbacks, etc...]*		
[Option 2]	*[Option Detail; provide benefits, drawbacks, etc...]*		
[Option 3]	*[Option Detail; provide benefits, drawbacks, etc...]*		
Recommended Option	*[Option #]*	*[Recommender(s)]*	*[Date of recommendation*
	[Notes]		
Final Decision	*[Selected Option #]*	*[Decider]*	*[Date of decision]*
	[Notes]		

Pre-Mortem Workshop Agenda

"Imagine it's the end of the project and things went terribly wrong. What caused the failure?"

Objective
Identify plausible reasons for project failure and proactively develop mitigation strategies

Output
- 3-5 high impact risks defined and added to project RAID log.
- Mitigation strategies and accountable roles for identified risks.
- Assigned action items as appropriate.

Roles
- **Facilitator:** Lead discussion, help team categorize/rank identified risks, updates project RAID log.
- **Participants:** Project team members, sponsors, others with thoughts on project risk.

Agenda
Welcome & Purpose
- **Facilitator** explains the concept of a pre-mortem, reviews the agenda, and the planned outputs.

"What Went Wrong?"
- **Participants** brainstorm 3–5 reasons the project failed.
    - Share scenarios using sticky notes, whiteboards, meeting chat, or a shared document.
    - Focus on specific, real concerns (e.g., "Vendor missed delivery date," not "bad luck").

Open Discussion and Categorize Risks
- **All** Open discussion. Share ideas with the team and discuss.
- **Facilitator** clusters ideas into categories, for example:
    - Technical failures.
    - Communication breakdowns.
    - Resource shortages.

Prioritize and Develop Mitigation Strategies
- **Participants** fill out a scorecard for identified risks ranking them on:
    - **Impact** (High / Medium / Low).
    - **Likelihood** (Likely / Possible / Unlikely).
- **Facilitator** compiles the votes and rank risks. For the top 3-5 risks:
    - Define actions to prevent or reduce it.
    - Define a mitigation plan if the risk occurs.
    - Record in the RAID log.

Close
- Review the identified risks.
- Confirm assigned actions and define timelines.

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SMART Goals Worksheet

		SMART Goal Worksheet	
Goal Statement		
Specific	What exactly needs to be done?	
	Who is responsible?	
	Where/Which system is involved?	
Measurable	Key metrics	
	Baseline and targets	
	Measurement tools or sources	
Achievable	Resources available	
	Risks? What can stop us?	
	Confidence level	
Relevant	Project alignment	
	Strategic value	
	End user Impact	
Time-bound	Start date	
	End date	
	Milestones or checkpoints	
Value	Benefit to end-users	
	Efficiency or cost savings	
	How does it support state priorities?	

Appendix B - Data Tables

Project Results by Decision Latency

Source: (The Standish Group, 2022)

Low Decision Latency	
Successful	75%
Challenged	21%
Failed	4%
High Decision Latency	
Successful	43%
Challenged	36%
Failed	21%

Budget Impact of Decision Latency

Source: (The Standish Group, 2022)

Budget Impact of Decision Latency			
	Est. Cost	Decision Cost	Total Cost
Low	$ 2,000,000	$ 200,000	$2,200,000
Moderate	$ 2,000,000	$ 400,000	$2,400,000
High	$ 2,000,000	$ 1,000,000	$3,000,000
Very High	$ 2,000,000	$ 2,000,000	$4,000,000

Risk Management Practices Impact on Budget Overruns

Source: (Bent, et al., 2022)

% Over Budget	Reactive %	Proactive %	Reactive #	Proactive #
0%	20%	40%	1078	2157
25%	20%	30%	1078	1618
50%	18%	15%	971	809
100%	12%	8%	647	431
150%	10%	4%	539	216
200%	8%	2%	431	108
300%	6%	1%	324	54
400%	4%	0%	216	0
500%	2%	0%	108	0

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