

Managing a Research Project: Five Questions Worth Re-Asking

Being accountable for a result you don't fully control is close to the default condition of research. You can't control the outcome of the work, and you often can't direct the people whose cooperation you need. What follows are five questions worth re-asking throughout a project, not answering once and filing away.

1. What am I and this project trying to deliver?

This first question sets the baseline. Ask yourself right at the start how the success of this project will actually be judged, or put another way, what you're accountable for in a system that keeps moving. It's easy to lose sight of what success genuinely looks like once you're inside the daily work.

Success sits within a set of interdependent constraints — cost, time, quality, and the overall size or scope of the work. Change one and the others move with it. If funding gets cut, you need more time, or you compromise on quality or scope. This forces you to identify your biggest constraint and manage the trade-offs consciously, rather than by default.

2. Who matters, and who must I influence?

Understanding your stakeholders means identifying anyone who invests resources or has a vested interest in the outcome, because success ultimately means meeting their expectations. Even when everyone wants the project to succeed, stakeholders frequently prioritise outcomes differently.

Priorities often conflict in research: the rush to publish against rigorous data quality, or the drive for rapid innovation against strict safety or biosecurity protocols. Mapping stakeholders out early means you navigate these tensions deliberately, rather than being blindsided by them when constraints tighten.

3. What could derail this project?

Manage this by looking closely at risk. Counter-intuitively, success and strong results carry their own risk — scope creep, where you find yourself attempting more than originally planned within the same resource constraints.

Things can also go wrong outright. A risk matrix — probability times impact — helps here, not as a precise calculation but as a heuristic for honest conversation: what is the risk appetite of your stakeholders and your environment? Are you in a setting willing to chase reward despite risk, a cautious one looking for safe options, or one focused almost entirely on avoiding uncertainty?

4. What needs to happen, and how do I navigate complexity?

This means defining specific deliverables and sequencing tasks in an environment where multiple things are happening at once. A simple Gantt chart makes the relationships between tasks visible — when they start, how long they last, when they end, and how they interact with each other. The timeline is your best estimate at the outset, not a fixed prediction, and needs monitoring and adjustment as the project evolves.

A changed deadline can affect other parts of the project in surprising ways. An updated timeline is a communication tool — it turns a missed deadline into an honest conversation rather than a confrontation, and lets you and your stakeholders see the knock-on effects clearly.

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5. How do I stay in control? How do I lead without authority?

In a complex, dynamic environment, protecting your time is essential, because leading without authority means fiercely defending your ability to create results. An Eisenhower matrix — mapping what's important against what's urgent — is an effective way to filter your priorities: are you reacting to what's urgent but relatively speaking, unimportant? This forces you to pause, filter out the noise, and decide what genuinely requires your expertise and what can be scheduled, delegated, or dropped.

A practical framework for incoming requests is a yes filter: “Yes” is reserved for tasks that align with your priorities. “Maybe” buys time to check your timeline and negotiate. “Share” allows for collaboration or delegation. “No” — as hard as it is — is the boundary you sometimes have to hold to keep the project on track.

These five questions don't remove the underlying unpredictability of a research project. What they give you is a way to keep making deliberate decisions inside it, rather than reacting to whatever surfaces first. The answers won't stay fixed for long — a change in funding, a stalled experiment, a new collaborator, and the picture shifts. The value is in the habit of re-asking, not in getting a final answer once.

I invite you to take a quiet moment and reflect on your own current research project. How might asking these five questions change the way you navigate the competing priorities of your week?

This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins. Find more inside Research Navigator at MargaretCollins.com.

