

Excelled Project Management Series

Project Handover Survival Guide

From Chaos to Clarity in
Your First 30 Days
as a New IT Project Manager

Jens Øster

Project Handover Survival Guide

From Chaos to Clarity in Your First 30 Days as a New IT Project Manager

Jens Øster, M.Sc.Eng.

This book is available at <https://leanpub.com/projecthandoversurvivalguide>

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Excelled Project Management Series

Battle-tested knowledge for IT professionals who deliver results that matter.

This book is part of a growing series of focused, hands-on guides designed to help you succeed in real-world project work. Whether you're new to project management or a seasoned professional, each title delivers tools and advice you can use immediately.



Figure 1. Current Books in The Excelled Project Management Series

Project Handover Survival Guide addresses the reality of taking over a project mid-flight. You don't know the project sponsor, the team, or the history. Maybe you're new to the company entirely. Files are scattered, documentation is missing, and everyone has different expectations of what you should deliver.

Everyone is staring at you, waiting to see if you can handle this. The team wonders if you understand their challenges. Stakeholders question whether you're experienced enough - maybe you feel too young for this responsibility, or perhaps too old to adapt to inherited chaos. You think: "Can I really manage this?" Your professional reputation is on the line, and the pressure feels overwhelming.

Here's the reality: the more chaotic the handover, the greater your opportunity to shine as the professional project manager who brings order from confusion. This guide provides structured, step-by-step guidance that transforms uncertainty into confidence and chaos into progress.

Following this 30-day framework, you'll become the project lighthouse your team looks to for direction during rough weather. You'll develop the project manager's "falcon eyes" that spot issues while they're still manageable risks. Most importantly, you'll build unshakeable professional credibility through visible results and clear leadership.

About the Author

Jens Øster is a senior IT project manager and consultant with extensive experience delivering complex projects across multiple sectors. With over 40 successful projects under his belt, he specialises in helping organisations navigate the challenges of inherited projects, agile transformations, and complex stakeholder environments.

His educational background includes a Master of Science in Engineering from the Technical University of Denmark, specialising in Computer Systems. He has supplemented this foundation with professional certifications in PRINCE2, PRINCE2 Agile, IPMA Level B, Scrum Master, SAFe, and ITIL.

Jens is passionate about sharing practical project management knowledge that works in real organisational contexts. His approach combines thorough methodology with pragmatic adaptation to organisational culture and constraints.

For more insights and resources, visit excelled-pm.dk or connect with Jens on [LinkedIn](#).



Release Notes

Version 1.0 - September 11, 2025

- **LAUNCH:**
 - PART 0: THE PROFESSIONAL'S PREPARATION
- **NEW Chapter:** In PART IV: DELIVER, LEARN, ADJUST (Week 4):
 - Chapter 10: Building Your Project Culture
- **LAUNCH:**
 - FROM HANDOVER TO MASTERY - Evolution beyond the first 30 days
- **LAUNCH: APPENDICES and REFERENCES**
 - Complete toolkit with RACI frameworks, risk assessment checklists
 - Professional templates for stakeholder meetings and status reports
 - Cultural assessment tools and team code of conduct examples
 - Guidance on using IPMA Characterisation of Management Complexity
 - AI acceleration strategies for modern project managers
 - PM and project evaluation tools
 - Glossary of Key Project Terms
- **Page count**
 - Main chapters 122 pages
 - Appendices 26 pages

Version 0.9 - August 26, 2025

- **LAUNCH: PART IV: DELIVER, LEARN, ADJUST (Week 4)**
 - Establishing sustainable project rhythm
 - Quick wins and early victories
- **NEW FIELD EXAMPLES:** Preface - What if you fail early?
- **NEW SECTIONS:** In Part I:
 - How to Get Your Documents in Shape

Version 0.8 - August 12, 2025

- **LAUNCH:** PART III: DECIDE, PLAN, MOBILISE (Week 3)
 - Risk assessment for inherited projects
 - Budget and timeline reality frameworks
 - Strategic planning with collaborative team sessions

Version 0.7 - July 30 2025

- **LAUNCH:** PART II: CLARIFY, CONFIRM, ALIGN (Week 2)
- **NEW FIELD EXAMPLE:** Chapter 2 - Reader discovered something unexpected when adapting the stakeholder introduction strategy in real-time.

Version 0.6 - July 16, 2025

- **LAUNCH:**
 - Preface
 - Quick Start Guide
 - PART I: ABSORB, LISTEN, LEARN (Week 1)
- **FOUNDATION:** Complete Week 1 survival framework with battle-tested strategies from 40+ project handovers
- **ENHANCED:** “What if you don’t...” sections added to main chapters based on early reader feedback

PREFACE

I've written this guide for every project manager who has ever stepped into a new project that feels messy, chaotic, or completely unfamiliar. This book is not a classic textbook; rather, it's a survival guide filled with battle-tested advice to help you get started immediately.

Who This Is For? This book is for real project managers in real situations. Perhaps you've just taken over a project and the pressure to deliver is already intense. The documentation might be overwhelming or non-existent, and you're learning the project, the people, and the platform all at once.

Your First Four Weeks. My focus is specifically on in-flight projects. I've outlined the most critical areas to concentrate on during your first four weeks. This isn't just about surviving; it's about establishing trust, building structure, and creating momentum from day one.

Informed by Experience. This guide draws on my experience since 2006, spanning more than 40 projects in both Nordic and international delivery environments. I also bring the benefit of formal training, including IPMA-B, PRINCE2, Scrum, SAFe, and ITIL.

About the Content. Not all projects are as chaotic as I describe in the introductions to each chapter. My intent is not to exaggerate the problem, but to focus on extreme cases to make the lessons more memorable. I want to make sure you're ready for any situation, no matter how messy it might be.

My primary goal is to help you cut through the noise, gain control quickly, avoid common traps, and become the calm, confident leader your project needs.

Be the Project Lighthouse and the Falcon

Good project managers guide others calmly and visibly. They also detect patterns early.

Think of yourself as both a lighthouse and a falcon:



Figure 2. Think of yourself as both a lighthouse and a falcon

Be the lighthouse: Steady, visible, and reassuring. Be the person all stakeholders can look to when they want to check whether they are on the right course.

Be the falcon: Sharp-eyed, scanning the landscape for risks, blockers, or silence. Use your project manager “falcon eyes” to zoom in on the issues that need to be addressed. Involve your team to find solutions, keep your project board informed, and ask them for guidance or approval where needed.

Start noticing where the governance model is unclear or weak, where responsibilities overlap, where critical activities have no owner, and where complex issues are being ignored.

If governance is weak precisely where the project is most complex, prepare to suggest countermeasures.

In your first weeks, you might not yet be the reliable lighthouse your project team turns to when in doubt about direction. But if you are the one who can explain why the project exists, and you've aligned with all stakeholders on their roles and contributions, then you'll become the lighthouse your team can

navigate by. Especially when the project hits rough weather.

It's usually quicker to act as the falcon. As someone new to the project, you can often spot issues that long-standing team members no longer see. Use your initial interviews with key stakeholders to gather valuable insight into where your falcon instincts should focus.

The 80/20 Rule for Project Takeovers

Based on my experience, the Pareto Principle applies powerfully to inherited project management. When you spend 20% of the time needed to know all the details, you'll gain 80% of the knowledge you need to lead effectively.

In practice, this means:

Scope Understanding: Just by creating and aligning on a one-page scope summary with your sponsor, you've accomplished 80% of the clarity work. You could spend months diving into detailed requirements documents, but that additional 80% of time will only give you marginally more useful knowledge for day-to-day leadership decisions.

Stakeholder Mapping: Five strategic 30-minute conversations with key stakeholders will reveal 80% of the political dynamics, concerns, and decision-making patterns you need to navigate successfully. You could interview everyone on the stakeholder list, but the incremental value diminishes rapidly.

Risk Assessment: Identifying the top 5-7 risks through systematic questioning will surface 80% of the threats that could derail your project. You could analyse every possible risk scenario, but most won't materially impact your success.

This guide focuses relentlessly on that crucial 20% of activities that generate 80% of your leadership effectiveness. Why? Because you don't have the luxury of perfect information when you inherit a project mid-flight. You need to be effective quickly, and effectiveness comes from focusing on what matters most, not knowing every detail.

How do you acquire the remaining 80% of the detailed knowledge? You'll acquire it naturally as you lead the project, and your team will help fill in the gaps.

How to Use This Guide

This book follows a four-week framework:



Figure 3. The 4 week framework.

- **Week 1: Absorb, Listen, Learn:** Your job is not to act fast. Your job is to see clearly.
- **Week 2: Clarify, Confirm, Align:** Turn scattered input into structure and shared understanding.
- **Week 3: Decide, Plan, Mobilise:** Create clear plans, strong teams, and real ownership.
- **Week 4: Deliver, Learn, Adjust:** Build trust by delivering value and establishing sustainable rhythm.

Your existing project management knowledge and leadership vision, as introduced in “Phase 0”, are the foundation for this framework. This book is designed to add to that knowledge and strengthen your foundation.

A Path for Every Project Manager

This guide is built to be flexible. Whether you’re new to the field, a veteran taking on a new challenge, or looking to sharpen your skills on an existing project, this book has a path for you.

If you’re taking over a project: This guide is your battle-tested survival kit.

- **For the new project manager (0-5 years of experience):** The pressure is on, and you can't afford to get lost in a sea of details. Your path starts with the Quick Start Guide—a checklist to get you on your feet immediately. When you encounter unfamiliar terms, jump to Appendix D: Glossary of Key Project Terms to get up to speed.
- **For the experienced project manager:** You know the ropes, but every project is different. You can use the Quick Start Guide to perform a rapid diagnostic check. Use your instincts to focus on the most critical areas and quickly establish your presence.

If you're optimizing an existing project: Use this book as a powerful tool for a project health check. Look at the Quick Start Guide and ask yourself: "What would a new project manager fix first?" See if your project could benefit from introducing some of the documents and approaches outlined here. For inspiration on continuous improvement, go straight to the last chapter, "From Handover to Mastery".

Thank you to Arshad Masood, Malte Øster, Cristiana Guedes, Robert Dolan, Carsten Bone Karlsen, Teddy Nielsen, and Rikke Frimurer for reviewing and contributing feedback to this book. Your input has made it stronger.

Jens Øster, Aarhus, September 2025

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QUICK START GUIDE

Keep this handy during your first 30 days. This is a generic guide. Use it and update it to fit your company's culture and project environment. Each of these points will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters, but this guide gives you the critical actions to take first.

Documentation to Collect and Update

Essential Documents (Get These First)

- **Project Charter/Brief/PID:** Why the project exists, success criteria, scope boundaries, and key stakeholders.
- **Latest Status Reports:** Progress tracking, milestone analysis, and issue patterns from the last 3 months.
- **Budget and Resource Plans:** Financial status, resource commitments, and approval authorities.
- **Risk and Issue Register:** Active risks with ownership and mitigation plans.
- **Key Stakeholders:** The top 5-7 key stakeholders that are most important you talk with to understand the project. E.g. Project Sponsor, Senior User, Team Leads or Solution Architect.
- **Project Organisation Chart:** Team structure, reporting lines, and governance model.

Valuable Context (When You Have Time)

- **Stakeholder Analysis:** Engagement assessment and political dynamics mapping.
- **Technical Architecture:** High-level solution approach and integration points. This is a must-have in an IT-project. In other project types, you will most likely have other documents that describe how you will construct what you will deliver.
- **Project History:** Status reports, steering committee minutes, change logs, and lessons learned.

- **Resource Plan:** Check if 10-15% of project hours are allocated to project management and if core team members have +50% time commitment.
- **Governance Model:** PMO guidelines, approval authorities, gate reviews, and escalation paths.

Week 1: Absorb, Listen, Learn

Your job is not to act fast. Your job is to see clearly.

Key Activities

- Secure access to all project systems and documentation within 24 hours.
- Schedule 1:1 meetings with 5-7 key stakeholders (30 minutes each).
- Ask the three critical questions: Why does this project exist? What's really broken? Who actually makes decisions?
- Create your four-folder system: Time, Cost, Scope, People for rapid intelligence gathering.
- Identify obvious quick wins and urgent issues requiring immediate attention.
- Map real vs. documented decision-makers and stakeholder power structures.
- Read essential documents (30 minutes max per document).
- Document initial findings in your project summary template.
- Conduct meetings with the key stakeholders using your PM introduction.
- Be the falcon: Scan for risks, blockers, and patterns others might miss.

Week 2: Clarify, Confirm, Align

Turn scattered input into structure and shared understanding.

Key Activities

- Create a project summary document confirming your understanding with sponsor approval.
- Turn confusion into clarity by documenting goals, scope, and success criteria.
- Share your findings with key stakeholders and invite corrections.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities using RACI or similar framework.
- Align ways of working including status formats, decision-making, and communication channels.
- Set early expectations about your PM style and approach.
- Analyse stakeholder map identifying supporters, blockers, and informal influencers.
- Document verbal commitments and get stakeholder confirmation on priorities.
- Establish meeting rhythms and communication protocols.
- Build confidence through structure rather than promising immediate solutions.

Week 3: Decide, Plan, Mobilise

Create clear plans, strong teams, and real ownership.

Must-Have Activities (Core Week 3 Focus)

- Develop or update high-level delivery plan for the next 3 months with clear milestones.
- Secure core team resources with +50% allocation for key team members following Half Double methodology principles.
- Update risk and issue registers with clear ownership and action plans, applying reference class forecasting principles.
- Establish project governance including steering committee, advisory boards, or working groups with clear PRINCE2 management by exception tolerances.
- Create scope clarification framework with explicit inclusions, exclusions, and assumptions.
- Plan first major milestone with stakeholder demos and review points.

Could-Have Activities (If Time Permits)

- Handle crisis projects with exception plans if tolerances are breached.
- Assess project complexity using IPMA framework (Appendix A) to identify leadership focus areas.
- Complete cultural assessment using tools like The Culture Factor for diverse teams.
- Apply Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions assessment to identify team development priorities.
- Build team ownership through collaborative planning sessions and psychological safety establishment.
- Map informal power networks and establish strategic alliances for project success.

Week 4: Deliver, Learn, Adjust

Build trust by delivering value and establishing sustainable rhythm.

Key Activities

- Deliver tangible progress demonstrating forward movement and competence.
- Establish sustainable rhythm through appropriate meeting cadence and communication.
- Implement Management by Exception with clear tolerances and escalation paths.
- Start to build project culture through team code of conduct and psychological safety.
- Track and share quick wins building credibility and stakeholder confidence.
- Leverage your team effectively keeping them informed and empowered.
- Minimise meeting overhead using digital alternatives and professional execution.
- Create visible progress tracking through dashboards or status boards.
- Handle your first significant decision with team input and a transparent process.
- Establish continuous improvement through retrospectives and feedback loops.

For detailed guidance on each activity, see the corresponding chapters in the full guide.

PART 0: THE PROFESSIONAL'S PREPARATION

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Question 3: Who Actually Makes Decisions Here?

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Scope Crisis Signals:

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Type 1: The Project Champions

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Type 2: The Blockers

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Type 3: The Fence-Sitters

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The 30-Minute Meeting Structure

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Your Positioning Script

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Managing Stakeholder Dynamics in Meetings

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PART II: CLARIFY, CONFIRM, ALIGN

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The Three-Source Verification Rule

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Example: Budget Status Reality Check

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Which Documents Actually Matter (And Which to Ignore)

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Digital Folder 4: PEOPLE

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PART III: DECIDE, PLAN, MOBILISE

(Week 3)

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PART IV: DELIVER, LEARN, ADJUST

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Understanding National Culture Impact

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Using Cultural Assessment Tools

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Applying Cultural Assessment Results

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Using Team Assessment Tools for Culture Building

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The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Assessment

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Field Example: Making the Team Own Scrum Values

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Your Project Culture Establishment Plan

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Week 1: Foundation Setting

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Week 2-3: Behavior Modeling

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Week 4: Team Ownership

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Month 2-3: Reinforcement

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What Success Looks Like After 60 Days

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What if you ignore cultural differences?

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Chapter Summary: Building Your Project Culture

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FROM HANDOVER TO MASTERY: WHAT'S NEXT

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The Principles That Drive Long-Term Success

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Deliver Often and Early

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Give Feedback to Your Team

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Evaluate Project Execution Quarterly

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Embrace Continuous Improvement

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Use Your Full Project Organisation

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Invest in Understanding Your Project Scope

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Delegate to Develop Others

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Maintain Radical Transparency

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Your Evolution as a Project Leader

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Good Luck with Your Projects

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APPENDICES

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Appendix A: Tools

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RACI Framework for Inherited Projects

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Risk Assessment Framework

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Project Foundation Risks:

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Team and Resource Risks:

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Technical and Integration Risks:

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IPMA - Characterisation of management complexity

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Low (1) and High (4) Descriptions for each Management Area

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Quick and Powerful Evaluation

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1. Preparation Email Template

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2. Meeting Request Template

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3. Capturing and Sharing Results

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Project Manager Evaluation

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Quantitative Evaluation (0-100%)

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Qualitative Evaluation (Free-Text Questions)

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Stakeholder Communication Scripts

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Escalation Communication Framework:

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Appendix B: Templates

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Template: Assertive Stakeholder Introduction Meeting

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Template: Team Member 1:1 Intro Meeting

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Template: Issue Handling Meeting

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Template: Weekly Status Report Template

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Template: Monthly Steering Committee Report:

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Code of Conduct - Example A

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1. Deliver what is best for the company

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2. Ask for help

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3. Deliver on time

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4. Meetings

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5. Time registration

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6. Response times

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Code of Conduct - Example B

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Communication Standards

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Professional Behaviour Standards

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Template: Scrum Value Workshop Intro Email and Agenda

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Appendix C: Use AI to Accelerate Your Project

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Pitfalls to Watch Out For:

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AI for Accelerated Impact: Your Strategic Use Cases

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Appendix D: Glossary of Key Project Terms

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The Documents You'll Need

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The People You'll Work With

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Your PM Tools

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How to Stay on Track

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PRINCE2 Core Principles to Know

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References and Further Reading

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Books and Reports

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Online Resources

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Additional Reading

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