

River Scout Services: Top 120 Project Rescue Root Cause Analysis Questions to Ask

When trying to establish the root cause of a project failure, it is important to ask the right questions to get a clear understanding of what went wrong. While some questions are very similar, it's sometimes necessary to ask the same question in multiple ways to get a relevant answer. Here are a sample of the questions I use when working with my clients on RCAs (Root Cause Analysis).

Scope, Schedule, Budget

1. What was the original project scope (overall and the piece in which you were engaged)?
2. What were the main assumptions and were they correct?
3. Was the project plan realistic and achievable, given the available resources and constraints?
4. What was the project budget, and was it adequate to support the scope and requirements of the project?
5. What were the project milestones and deadlines?
6. Were there any issues related to project scope or requirements, such as changes or misunderstandings?
7. Were all potential schedule impacts considered (e.g., product launch, acquisitions, holidays, vacations, shutdowns or other blackout periods, materials shortages, wage increases, contract conflicts, etc.)?
8. Did all team members know the scope?
9. Did the scope change over time?
10. If there was a scope change, was there an approval process for changes to the scope?
11. If there was a scope change, was there sufficient communications about the scope change?
12. If there was a scope change, was there a change in the schedule, resources, or dependencies needed for the change in scope?
13. If there were misunderstandings in the scope, how were they resolved?
14. Was there contingency (in schedule and budget) built into the plans to cover unknown issues or known risks that materialize?

Project Management, Process, and Execution

15. Was there a clear project plan in place, and was it followed and updated throughout the project?
16. Were project risks identified and managed effectively?
17. Was there a RAID log (Risks, Actions, Issues and Decisions)?
18. Was there a risk management plan that either accepted, avoided, or had alternatives identified, documented, and known?
19. Were the risks prioritized (scored via probability and impact)?
20. Was the RAID log maintained, tracked, and communicated regularly for open items?
21. Were critical decisions (changes in scope, schedule, budget, approved designs, changes in business requirements, decisions on technology, changes in partners, etc.), documented in the RAID (under decisions) and communicated to those who needed to be informed?
22. If project risks materialized, were corrective actions taken?



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23. How were changes in scope communicated to the team and the steering committee(s)?
24. Were the project milestones known to the team members?
25. Did the project team believe the project milestones were realistic and achievable?
26. What was the project team structure?
27. Were roles and responsibilities clearly defined and understood?
28. What was the level of communication and collaboration among team members, stakeholders, and project sponsors?
29. Was there a clear project management methodology and process in place?
30. Was it effectively followed and adapted as needed?
31. Were there any issues related to project quality, such as inadequate testing or validation?
32. Were there any issues related to project resources, such as insufficient or misallocated staff, equipment, or technology?
33. Were there any issues related to project scheduling or sequencing, such as delays or dependencies?
34. Were there any issues related to project governance, such as ineffective oversight or decision-making?
35. Did all team members understand the areas for which they had ownership?
36. Was a RACI matrix used? Was it clear? Was there more than one party assigned as Accountable (A) to any activity?
37. Was there any documentation of the roles and responsibilities for all the team members?
38. How were decisions made?
39. Was it clear who was accountable and empowered to make decisions? Were decisions ever questioned or rescinded?
40. Were decisions made in a timely manner?
41. Was the project schedule detailed enough?
42. Did all team members know what tasks they needed to do and when?
43. Were there regular project status meetings?
44. What were the regularly scheduled meetings? Who was invited?
45. Did team members attend and actively participate in scheduled meetings?
46. How were the project schedule and task schedule communicated to each team member?
47. What was the process if a schedule date was missed?
48. Was there an escalation process in place if dates were missed?
49. Were there dependencies on others outside the organization or company?
50. Was there an integrated schedule including all internal and external tasks and their dependencies?
51. Were there any guidelines about how quickly you should acknowledge or respond to emails, IMs, calls, etc.?
52. Were there any guidelines about accepting and attending meeting requests?
53. For meetings where there were many people, was there an agenda and preparation materials provided ahead of the meeting?
54. Were there meeting minutes routinely provided highlighting any RAID (risk, action, items, or decision) items?



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55. Were there status reports that were distributed regularly?
56. Did the status reports accurately reflect the status? Were they overly optimistic or pessimistic?
57. What was the content of the status reports (e.g., progress against schedule, issues, risks, actions, decisions, resourcing, etc.)?

Culture

58. How would you describe the culture of the project team?
59. If there were team members in different time zones, how was communication between team members handled?
60. Were there any language barriers? If so, how did you overcome them?
61. Were there any concerns with inclusion or diversity within the project team?
62. Did you feel like you were part of a team?
63. Were there any team building activities?

Leadership

64. What was the project vision?
65. Did the team members and stakeholders know and understand the project vision?
66. Did you understand the WIIFM (What's in it for me?) of the project vision?
67. Who were the key stakeholders in the project, and were their needs and expectations clearly understood and addressed?
68. Were the steering committee meetings scheduled and held regularly?
69. Did steering committee members attend and actively participate?
70. Did the team communicate all status openly to the steering committee?
71. Were the project goals and objectives clearly defined and communicated to all stakeholders and the project team members?
72. Was there sufficient management oversight of the project?
73. Were project metrics tracked and reported regularly?
74. Were there any external factors that impacted the project's success, such as changes in regulations, economic conditions, customer requirements, or market trends?
75. Was there any conflicting direction from the leadership on priorities, resources, responsibilities, or direction?
76. Did you feel valued as part of this project?
77. Do you believe this project is a valuable activity for your career?

People

78. Were the right people assigned to the project, and did they have the necessary skills and expertise?
79. Did the project team have the necessary tools and infrastructure to complete the project successfully?



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80. What was the level of experience and expertise of the project team? Were there any skill gaps or training needs?
81. Was the project team adequately trained and supported to perform their roles effectively?
82. Were there any interpersonal conflicts among team members that impacted the project's progress or morale?
83. Were there any communication barriers that hindered effective collaboration among team members?
84. Were there any challenges related to the availability or allocation of team members, such as team members being overcommitted or unavailable when needed?
85. Were there any challenges related to the motivation or engagement of team members, such as low morale or burnout?
86. Did team members have the necessary resources to complete their assigned tasks, such as bandwidth, access to technology and support staff?
87. Were there any challenges related to the management or leadership of the project team?
88. Did team members receive adequate feedback and recognition for their contributions to the project?

Process

89. Were there any changes made to the project scope, timeline, or budget, and were those changes effectively managed and communicated?
90. Were project risks and issues properly identified, tracked, and addressed throughout the project?
91. Were the project requirements properly documented, and communicated to team members and stakeholders?
92. Was there a mechanism to trace requirements and confirm they were satisfied throughout the project (e.g., a Requirements Traceability Matrix)?
93. Were there any quality control processes in place, and were they followed throughout the project?
94. Were there any project audits performed? If yes, who (organization) did them?
95. Were project tasks and responsibilities properly assigned, tracked, and managed?
96. Were there any communication breakdowns that hindered project progress or decision-making?
97. Was there a change control process in place, and was it followed when changes occurred in the project?
98. Were there any lessons learned captured and incorporated into future projects?

Questions to ask if processes were not followed:

If there were processes in place but they were not followed, it is important to understand why they were not followed. Here are some questions you may consider asking:



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99. Why were the processes not followed? Was there a lack of understanding, or was there resistance from team members?
100. Who was responsible for ensuring that all team members were aware of and following the project processes?
101. If processes were not being followed, did team members understand the impact?
102. Were there any challenges related to implementing the processes, such as lack of resources or time constraints?
103. Were team members properly trained in the processes, and were there adequate resources available to support their use?
104. Were there any incentives or disincentives for following the processes, such as performance evaluations or bonuses?
105. Was there conflicting direction from the leadership that caused ambiguity on following the process?
106. Were team members aware of the consequences of not following the processes, and were those consequences clearly communicated?
107. Were the processes properly documented, and were they clear and easy to understand?
108. Were there any changes made to the processes during the project, and were those changes effectively communicated and implemented?
109. Were there any other factors that may have contributed to the failure to follow the processes, such as competing priorities or lack of accountability?
110. What can be done to improve adherence to the processes in future projects?

Technology

When trying to determine the root cause of a project failure, it is also important to ask specific questions about the technology used in the project. Here are some questions you may consider asking:

111. Did the technology used in the project meet the project requirements, and were those requirements properly documented and communicated to the technology team?
112. Were there any challenges related to the integration of different technologies or systems?
113. Were there any challenges related to the availability, reliability, or performance of the technology used in the project?
114. Were team members trained in the use of the technology, and were there adequate resources available to support their use?
115. Were there any changes made to the technology during the project, and were those changes properly communicated and implemented?
116. Were there any security or privacy concerns related to the technology used in the project, and were those concerns properly addressed?
117. Were there any compatibility issues between the technology used in the project and the technology used by stakeholders or end-users?
118. Were there any technical constraints that hindered project progress or decision-making?



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119. Were there any licensing or intellectual property issues related to the technology used in the project?
120. Were there any other factors that may have contributed to the failure of the technology in the project, such as lack of documentation or support?

One final note on these questions. While I give examples in the questions (e.g., Were there any issues related to project governance, such as ineffective oversight or decision-making?) I recommend using an open-ended questioning technique without providing these examples. The examples are primarily for you to understand the context of the question. In the example above, I would say only “Were there any issues related to project governance?” Providing the example could lead the answerer to a conclusion and stifle answers which might provide you more insight.

