Six Sigma Kaizen

PROJECT MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

The Newsletter for Continuous Improvement Practitioners

THE CONTROL PHASE ILLUSION:

Why Projects Succeed on Paper — and Fail in Practice

Why gains disappear after project close • A real-world case study • Seven proven prevention strategies

> “The measure of success is not whether you have a tough problem to deal with, but whether it is the same problem you had last year.”
>
> — John Foster Dulles | Applied to improvement work: did you control what you changed?

70%	4 mo.	85%
of improvement projects lose gains within 1 year	average time before backslide begins	of teams cite 'no monitoring plan' as root cause

The Problem: Closing the Book Before the Story Is Over

Every project manager knows the feeling. The metrics look great. The team has put in the work. The sponsor is ready to declare victory. There is immense pressure — organizational, budgetary, psychological — to close the project and move on to the next one. And so the file gets closed, the team disperses, and the improvement gets handed off to operations.

What happens next is one of the most consistent and costly failures in all of improvement work: the gains disappear.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. But slowly, quietly, predictably — like air leaking from a tire. Within months, the old behaviors creep back in. The process drifts. The metrics that looked so good at project close begin to slide. And by the time anyone notices, the team has long since moved on, accountability has dissolved, and the cost of the original problem has been silently restored.

This is the Control Phase Illusion: the mistaken belief that because an improvement worked during the project, it will sustain itself after the project closes.

> **!** The Control Phase is the final phase of DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) in Six Sigma, and its equivalent exists in every structured improvement methodology — Lean, Agile, Kaizen, and PDCA. It is consistently the most compressed, under-resourced, and prematurely exited phase of project work.

Why This Happens: The Anatomy of a Premature Closeout

The control phase failure is not random. It follows a predictable pattern driven by four compounding pressures:

Pressure	What It Looks Like	The Consequence
Schedule Pressure	Project timelines treat control as the last box to check. Teams reach the control phase exhausted and over deadline.	Control plans are written hastily, monitoring durations are shortened, and sign-off is rushed.
Resource Reallocation	The team is already being pulled toward the next project before this one closes.	Nobody owns long-term monitoring. Operations accepts the handoff without truly understanding the controls.
Confirmation Bias	Early post-improvement data looks good, and the team anchors on that signal as proof of success.	Teams stop watching before the process has been tested through full seasonal, volume, or behavioral cycles.
Milestone Pressure	Leadership wants to count the project as closed on the portfolio tracker.	Completion is equated with success before sustained performance is verified.
Knowledge Transfer Gaps	Documentation exists but the team who built it has moved on. Operations inherits controls they didn't design.	Controls are ignored, worked around, or abandoned when they become inconvenient.

Case Study: The Warehouse Throughput Project

► The following case study is drawn from a composite of real improvement projects in distribution and logistics environments. Names and specific figures are illustrative. The pattern of failure is not.

Background: A Promising Project with Strong Early Results

A regional distribution company launched a Lean improvement project targeting throughput bottlenecks in their outbound shipping area. Order fulfillment cycle time had grown from a baseline of 4.2 hours to 6.8 hours over 18 months, driven by disorganized pick-path routing, inconsistent staging procedures, and ad-hoc labeling practices.

Over 14 weeks, the cross-functional project team redesigned pick-path sequencing using zone-based routing, standardized the staging area layout with visual management controls, and implemented a tiered labeling protocol. End-of-project results were impressive:

Metric	Baseline	At Project Close
Avg. cycle time (hrs)	6.8	**4.1 (↓ 40%)**
Labeling error rate	3.2%	**0.6% (↓ 81%)**
Orders shipped on time	71%	**94% (↑ 32%)**

The Handoff: Where It Started to Unravel

The project was declared a success. A four-page control plan was written documenting the new procedures. The operations supervisor received a briefing. The project was formally closed three months after the Improve phase concluded.

What the control plan did not include: assigned ownership of each control. A defined measurement cadence beyond the initial 30-day check-in. Escalation thresholds that would trigger a response. Any plan for training new associates who joined after project close. Or a defined date for a formal 90- or 180-day performance review.

The initial 30-day check-in showed metrics holding. That data point became the last formal monitoring activity the project team performed.

⚠ What followed was a textbook case of process drift. The zone-based pick routing began to erode as supervisors made ad-hoc exceptions during peak periods. The staging area markings faded and were not repainted. New associates were trained on the old process by veterans who had partially reverted. By month six, cycle time had drifted back to 5.9 hours. By month ten, the labeling error rate was 2.1% — a 250% increase from the post-project low.

The Root Cause Audit (18 Months Later)

When a new operations director commissioned a retrospective audit, the root causes of the regression were documented. The findings were painfully predictable:

Root Cause Identified	Category	Could Have Been Prevented?
No assigned owner for ongoing metric monitoring	Accountability	Yes — define ownership in control plan
Measurement stopped after 30-day check	Monitoring Duration	Yes — specify minimum 6-month horizon
New associate training omitted process changes	Knowledge Transfer	Yes — update SOPs, tie to onboarding
Staging markings degraded without maintenance plan	Visual Management	Yes — scheduled audit checklist
Supervisor exceptions made without escalation protocol	Governance	Yes — response plan with thresholds
No formal 90/180-day project review scheduled	Review Cadence	Yes — define review dates at closeout

The cost of the regression: an estimated $340,000 in restored inefficiency costs over 18 months — more than double the original project investment. The improvement had worked. The control had failed.

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Seven Strategies to Prevent Control Phase Failure

Prevention is not complicated — but it requires deliberate action, starting well before the project reaches the Control phase. The following strategies address the most consistent failure modes.

1

Define a Monitoring Horizon, Not Just a Check-In Date

A single 30-day check-in is not a control plan — it is an illusion of control. The monitoring horizon should span at minimum one full cycle of all major process variables: seasonal volume fluctuations, quarterly staffing changes, annual audits, or whatever cycles are relevant to the process. For most operational improvements, a 6-month minimum monitoring window should be standard. High-complexity or high-risk improvements warrant 12 months.

2

Assign Named Owners — Not Departments

A control plan that assigns ownership to 'Operations' or 'Quality' has assigned ownership to no one. Every control in the plan needs a named individual: a person with a title, a calendar, and accountability to a specific leadership stakeholder. This person signs the control plan at closeout. They appear on the 90-day review invitation. If they change roles, the plan is updated. Named ownership is the single most reliable predictor of sustained performance.

3

Set Statistical Control Limits — and Define the Response

A control chart without a response plan is decoration. The control plan must specify: what metric is being tracked, at what frequency, who tracks it, what the upper and lower control limits are, and — critically — what happens when a signal is detected. Who is notified? What is the timeline for response? Is there a pre-defined corrective action or does an investigation get triggered? Answering these questions before close means the process is not dependent on improvisation when drift occurs.

4

Build the Handoff — Not Just the Document

Documentation transfer is not knowledge transfer. The operations team that receives the control plan needs to have participated in creating it, or at minimum, undergone structured training in both the what and the why of every control. They need to understand not just the procedure but the consequence of deviating from it. A control plan that sits in a shared drive and is never opened is not a control — it is a liability. Handoff should include walk-through sessions, verified understanding, and documented sign-off from receiving parties.

5

Schedule Formal Post-Project Reviews Before You Close

The 90-day and 180-day post-close reviews should be on the calendar before the project is officially signed off. These are not optional check-ins — they are formal performance reviews with the sponsor, the process owner, and the original project team lead. The agenda is structured: review the control charts, validate that metrics remain within defined limits, confirm that controls are actively being executed, and identify any drift or emerging risks. If the 90-day review is not scheduled before closeout, the probability of it occurring drops to near zero.

6

Anchor Controls in Systems — Not in Habits

Human behavior is the weakest link in any control system. The most durable controls are those embedded in systems that make deviation difficult or impossible: updated SOPs integrated into training programs, measurement requirements built into existing reporting dashboards, visual controls maintained on preventive maintenance schedules, and automated alerts triggered by data rather than dependent on someone remembering to look. Every control that relies on someone choosing to do it is a control at risk. Every control embedded in a system is a control with durability.

7

Redefine 'Project Success' at the Organizational Level

Perhaps the most fundamental prevention strategy is also the most organizational: change what 'done' means. If your project management culture equates project close with success, you will always have premature exits. Organizations that sustain improvements define success as verified, long-term performance — not the closeout meeting. This means tracking project savings at 12 months post-close, not just at the final tollgate. It means project leaders remain accountable through the post-close review period. And it means the portfolio review asks not just 'how many projects did we close' but 'how many projects are still holding their gains.'

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Quick Reference: Control Phase Readiness Checklist

Use this checklist before closing any improvement project. If any item is unchecked, the project is not ready to close.

☐ Item	Standard	Owner
Monitoring horizon defined (minimum 6 months)	6–12 months minimum	Project Lead
Named individual owner assigned to each control	Person, not department	Sponsor
Control limits (UCL/LCL) set with data	Based on process capability	Black Belt / Lead
Response plan defined for each out-of-control signal	Who, what, when	Process Owner
SOPs updated and integrated into training	Current revision dated	Process Owner
Visual controls on preventive maintenance schedule	Scheduled audit date	Facilities / Ops
90-day review on calendar before closeout	Date confirmed, invite sent	Project Lead
180-day review on calendar before closeout	Date confirmed, invite sent	Project Lead
Receiving team walk-through completed	Sign-off documented	Operations Mgr
Metrics integrated into existing dashboard/report	Live data, not manual pull	Data / Analytics
New associate training plan updated	Next onboarding cohort confirmed	Training / HR
Sponsor formally accepts ongoing accountability	Signed control plan	Sponsor

Closing Thought

★ The Control Phase is not the end of the project. It is the beginning of proof.

Any team can improve a process for four weeks while a project is active and leadership attention is high. The test of real improvement is what the process looks like in month seven, when the team has moved on, the pressure has shifted elsewhere, and the only thing holding the gains in place is the discipline that was built into the system at closeout.

The projects that sustain are the ones that planned for sustainment from the beginning — not as an afterthought, but as a design requirement. Build the control before you declare the win. Verify the win before you close the file. Review the performance before you call it permanent.

Done right, the Control Phase is not the end of the improvement story. It is the chapter that determines whether the story has a good ending.