



Pro**Kanban**.org

# Stop Guessing:

## Reading Risk Signals for Effective Delivery

*Creating flow and reading the signals your work is already sending.*



# Who here has run out of gas?

Not run low. Actually run out.

On the shoulder, hazards blinking, watching everyone else drive past.

# It never comes out of nowhere.

The needle was falling the whole drive. The light came on miles back. The car was telling you, the entire time, exactly what was about to happen.

You just weren't looking at the gauge. You were looking at the road, the clock, the place you were trying to get to.

**Every missed delivery date works the same way.**  
**We watch the deadline. But the signal is in the flow.**





SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

# 1) “Almost done”

The Epic that’s been almost done for weeks now.



ProKanban.org



# The epic that's been "almost done" for weeks

## 1 THE PROBLEM

An epic sits at "nearly there" far longer than it was estimated to take.

## 2 THE SIGNAL

Its age has passed the point where most epics this size are already done.

## 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

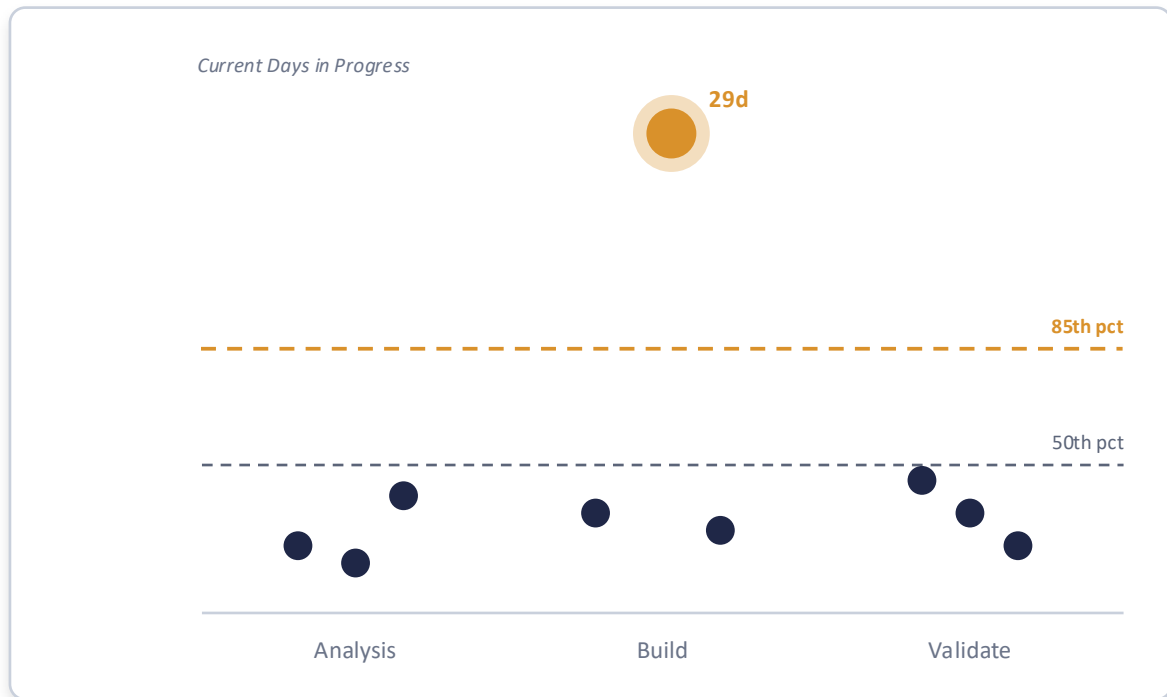
It's stuck, oversized, or quietly absorbing scope. The longer it ages, the lower its odds of finishing soon.

## 4 WHAT TO DO

Make the age of current work visible. Trigger the conversation when it crosses the threshold, not at the deadline.



# Trigger a conversation when it crosses a threshold



## WHY IT MATTERS

Age is the earliest honest read you have on an epic. Long before a date is missed, an item that has outlived its typical cycle time is already telling you it is in trouble. Watch the line, and you can act while there is still time to split it or clear the block.

*Total work item age is elapsed time from when work started to today.*





SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

## 2) New work takes priority

Many things have been initiated, yet no progress is being made.



ProKanban.org



# Everything's started, nothing's finishing

## 1 THE PROBLEM

The portfolio is full of active epics, teams are busy, and almost nothing closes.

## 2 THE SIGNAL

Epics in progress keep climbing while epics completed per period stay flat.

## 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

You're starting faster than you're finishing. Every new epic stretches the cycle time of all the others.

## 4 WHAT TO DO

Cap how much runs at once. Finish the oldest work first. Make "stop starting, start finishing" an operating rule.



## Limit WIP and finish the oldest work first



### WHY IT MATTERS

Busy is not the same as delivering. When you start faster than you finish, every new epic quietly stretches the ones already open. The widening gap is the warning that your portfolio is filling up faster than it can drain.

*Epics started stay high while finished flattens. The gap is work piling up.*





SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

# 3) Invisible Scope Creep

Epics that become stuck tend to be the ones that continue to expand.



ProKanban.org



# The epic that keeps growing

## 1 THE PROBLEM

An epic never gets closer to done, no matter how much the team delivers.

## 2 THE SIGNAL

Work is added faster than work is finished. Percent complete stalls because the finish line keeps moving.

## 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

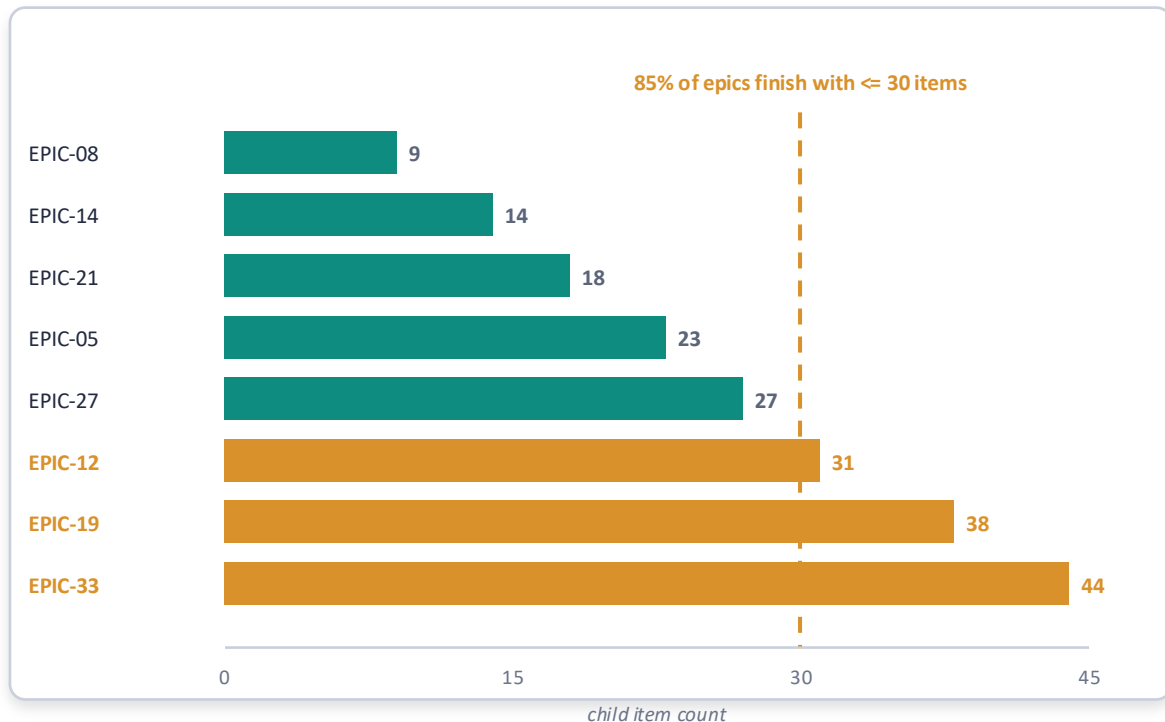
Scope is outpacing delivery. The original estimate stopped being real a while ago.

## 4 WHAT TO DO

Track work added versus work finished per epic. Make every scope addition a visible, deliberate decision.



# Make Epic size visible and capture



Each in-flight epic by child item count. Three have crossed the historical threshold of 30.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Every epic that finishes tells you something about size. When 85% of them complete with 30 child items or fewer, an epic climbing past that line is unlikely to finish on its current path. Watching the count cross the threshold flags the risk early, while you can still split the work.





SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

## 4) Impossible Due Dates

Deadlines are repeatedly missed, causing stakeholders to lose trust in the forecasts.



ProKanban.org



# The date you missed without warning

## 1 THE PROBLEM

A date held steady right up until it didn't. The slip felt like it came from nowhere.

## 2 THE SIGNAL

A forecast re-run continuously, shown as a range, with the likely window sliding later week over week.

## 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

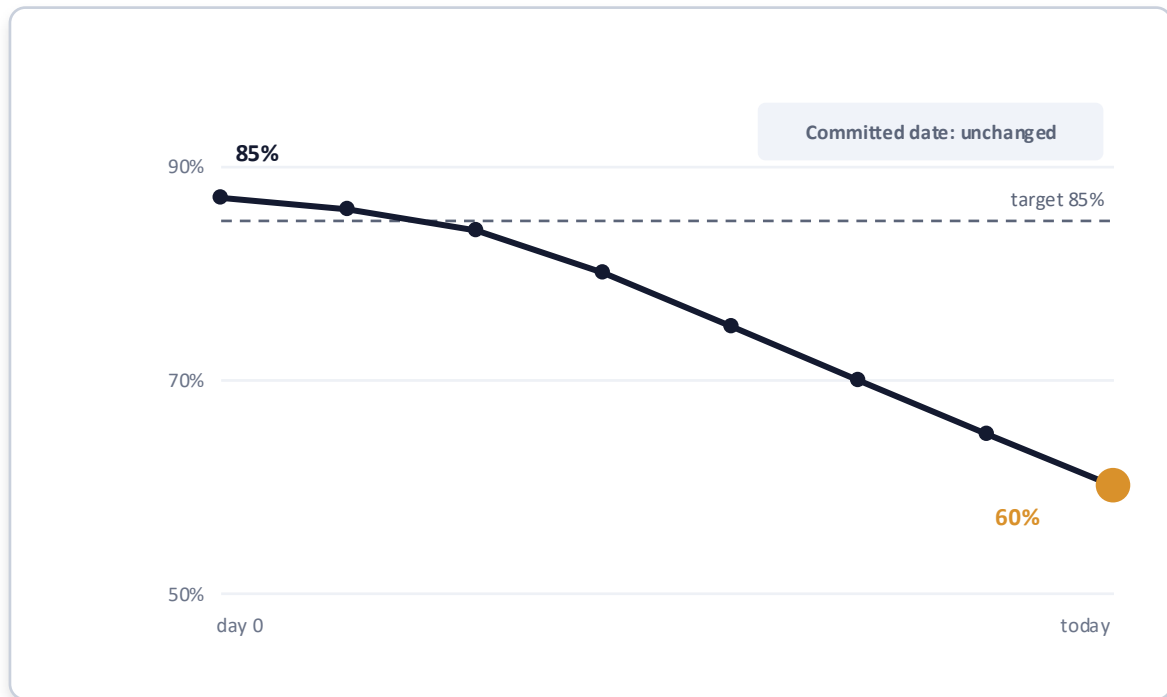
The original date was a single-point wish. The slip was visible weeks before the deadline made it official.

## 4 WHAT TO DO

Forecast as a range from day one. Re-run it as data changes. React when the window moves, not when the date arrives.



## Respond promptly when the risk of delivery rises



### WHY IT MATTERS

A single committed date hides risk until the very end. Tracking the daily odds of hitting it turns a green status into an honest one, and gives you weeks of warning instead of a last-minute apology.

*The committed date never moves. The daily likelihood of hitting it does.*



SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

## 5) Hidden Hand-offs

It looks like work is active but its waiting to be picked up or hiding in a new queue.



ProKanban.org

## ⏸ In progress, but actually waiting

### 1 THE PROBLEM

An epic is technically being worked, but it crawls and no one can say why.

### 2 THE SIGNAL

Most of its life is spent waiting, not being worked. Active time is a small fraction of elapsed time.

### 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

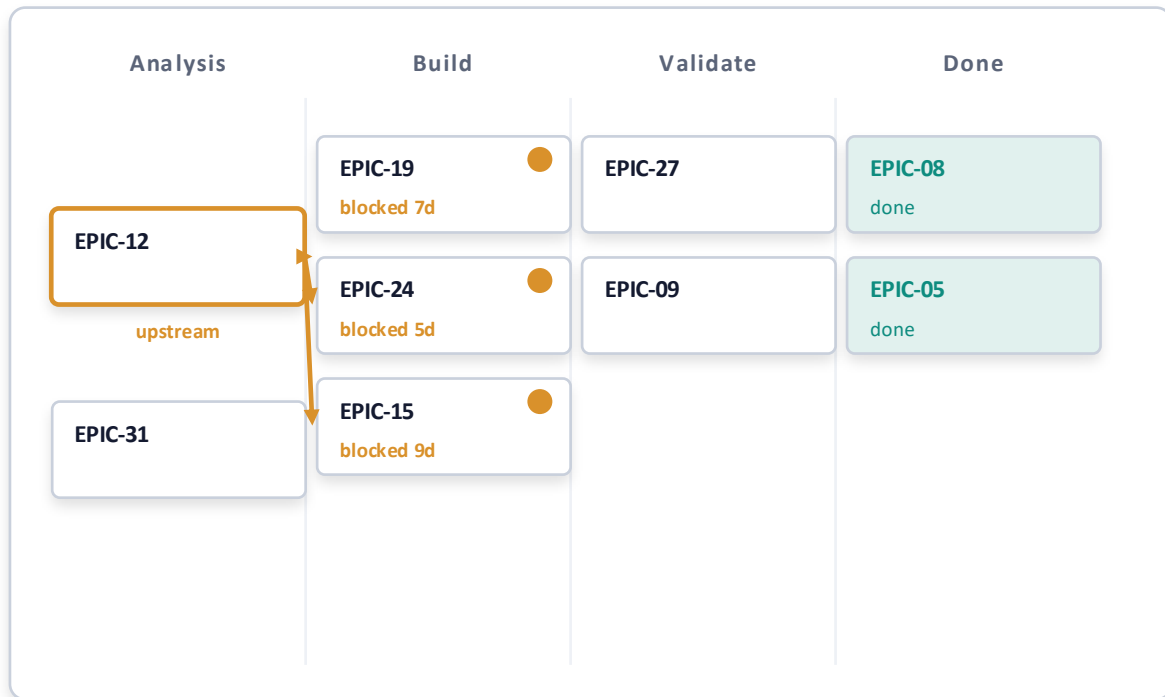
The delay isn't effort or headcount. It's queues, handoffs, and blocked time.

### 4 WHAT TO DO

Make waiting and blocked time as visible as active work. Attack the queues between stages, not the time inside them.



# Connect the handoffs that stall work



## WHY IT MATTERS

When blocks cluster at one handoff, the problem is rarely the team in pain. It is the upstream work everyone depends on. Making dependencies visible in place shows you the real constraint, so you fix the source instead of pushing the symptom.

Three blocks cluster in Build, every arrow tracing back to one upstream epic.





SIX SIGNALS YOUR SYSTEM IS ALREADY SENDING

## 6) Shifting Focus

Teams are busy but not on work we initially planned or prioritized.



ProKanban.org

# Teams busy with everything except the priorities

## 1 THE PROBLEM

Teams are occupied with other tasks instead of focusing on priorities, and it remains unnoticed until we miss the delivery deadline entirely.

## 2 THE SIGNAL

Analyzing the distribution of work item types based on work in progress instead of completed tasks allows us to react promptly and adjust our approach as needed.

## 3 WHAT IT'S TELLING YOU

Work distribution illustrates the way our time, focus, and investments are presently being spent.

## 4 WHAT TO DO

Examine the distribution of tasks throughout the portfolio and within each team to clearly understand your objectives.



# Know your target investment so you can shift sooner



## WHY IT MATTERS

Leaders set priorities, but capacity is where intent meets reality. If the strategic work is only a sliver of where effort actually goes, the roadmap is fiction. Seeing the split is the first step to protecting time for the work that matters most.

*Of everything in flight, strategic epics are a sliver. Tech debt and KTLO win.*





THE CALL TO ACTION

# Your system has a fuel gauge. Make the signals visible.

Aging epics. Rising WIP. Scope outrunning delivery.  
A forecast sliding. Work that's waiting. Drift from priorities.

**Pick one signal. Put it on the board this week.**

*Stop guessing what's going to slip. Start reading the signal.*

# Join the ProKanban Community



Email

[support@prokanban.org](mailto:support@prokanban.org)



Website

[www.prokanban.org](http://www.prokanban.org)



Instagram

[prokanban.community](https://www.instagram.com/prokanban.community)