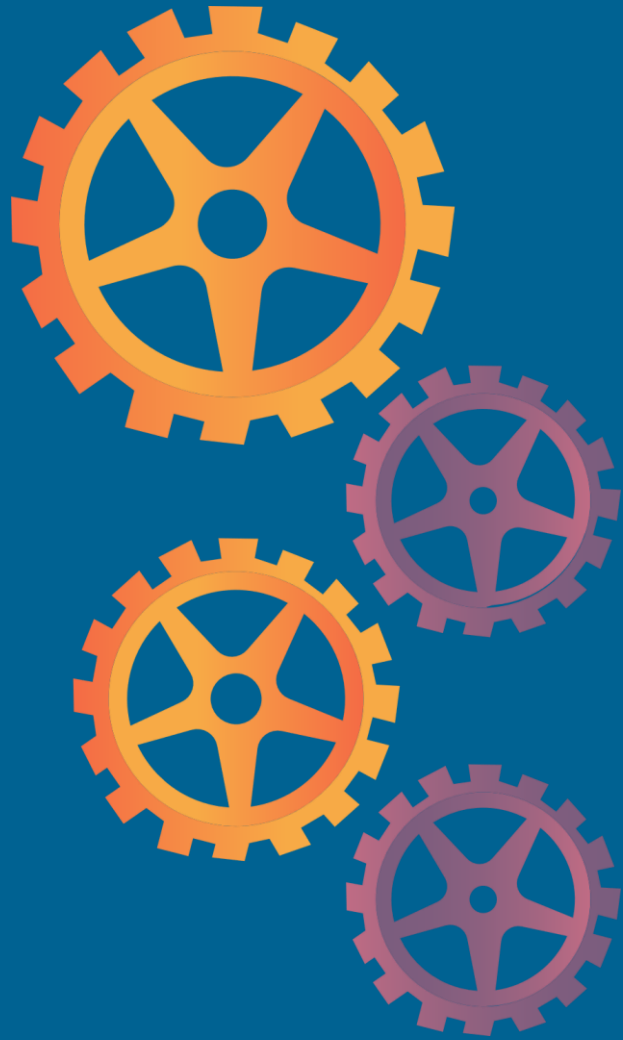# Introduction to Ambiguity

Understanding the sources of ambiguous situations

Maximilian Plag – Helliwood media & education
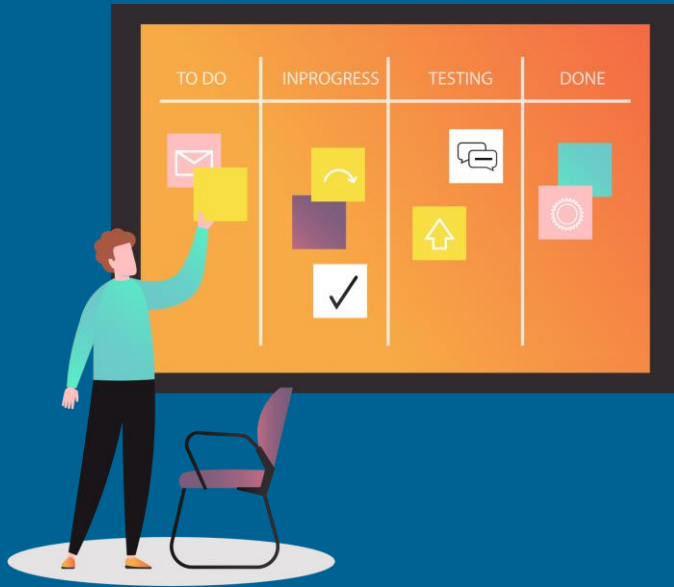
Content Overview

- Definition of ambiguous situations
- Sources of ambiguity in a proect

What are ambiguous situations?

Ambiguous situations can occur in our everyday lives, especially when dealing with **complex tasks and projects**. They are usually characterized by **complete or partial lack of information** or inconsistent information about a situation at a given point in time.

Lack of information impacts decision-making and often evokes negative emotions, such as stress or anxiety, and can have long-term consequences on job satisfaction.

Recognizing and managing ambiguous situations effectively is an important competence needed in the 21st century workplace.

Sources of ambiguity in a project (1)

When dealing with complex tasks and projects, you may experience ambiguities in every phase of the project. According to a 2019 study done by the Project Management Institute (PMI), 312 project managers from different backgrounds identified **five main types of ambiguities** in projects. They illustrate the categories of ambiguities that can occur in any project.
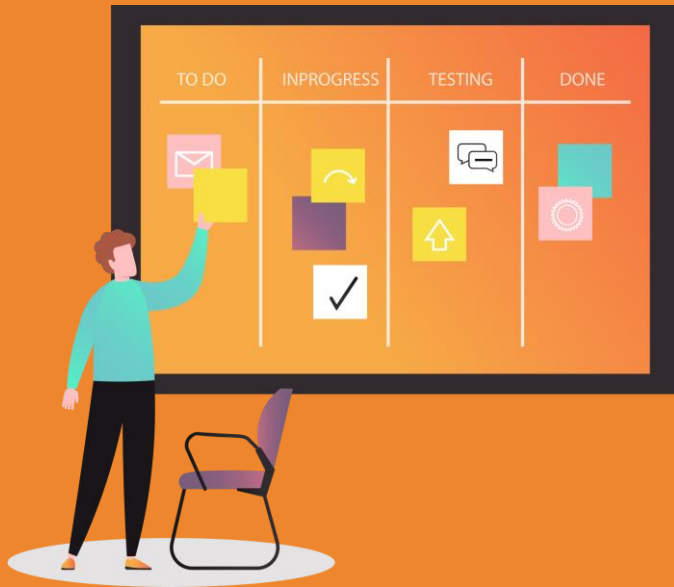
I.   Task complexity

• Ambiguity related to task coordination
   For example when coordinating complex project deliverables, coordinating work, coordinating document access, etc.
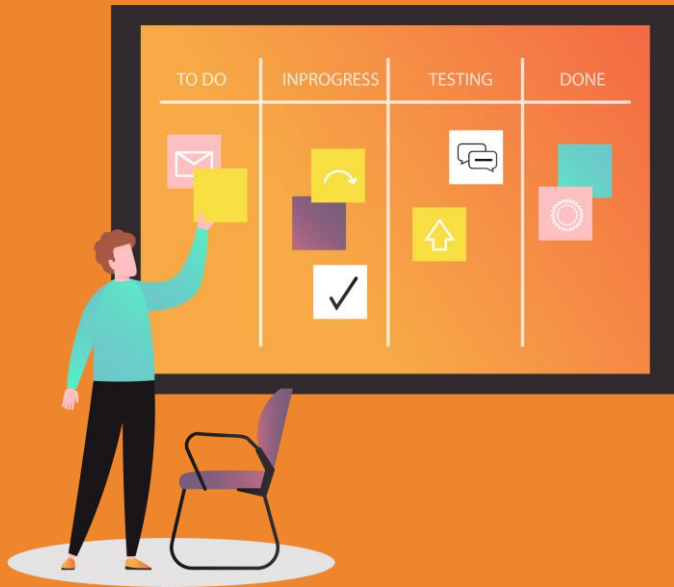
• Ambiguity related to task novelty
   Tasks that have never been done before and where limited knowledge existed to comfortably approach these tasks.

• Ambiguity related to challenging problems
   Tasks where it was unclear to the project manager how to best proceed.

Sources of ambiguity in a project (2)

II. **Core aspects of project management**

- Ambiguity related to managing progress
Ambiguities affecting timely project progress. For example, lack of clear timeline or waiting for an issue to be resolved in order to progress with the project.

- Ambiguity related to managing resources
Ambiguities related to uncertainties around resource allocation and access to resources (i.e., human, financial, and/or time resources). For example, the removal of funds or the decision to hire more workers.

- Ambiguity related to managing scope
Ambiguities related to limited information regarding project For example providing estimates for a project when we don't have the full scope or requirements.

Sources of ambiguity in a project (3)

III. Managing Stakeholders
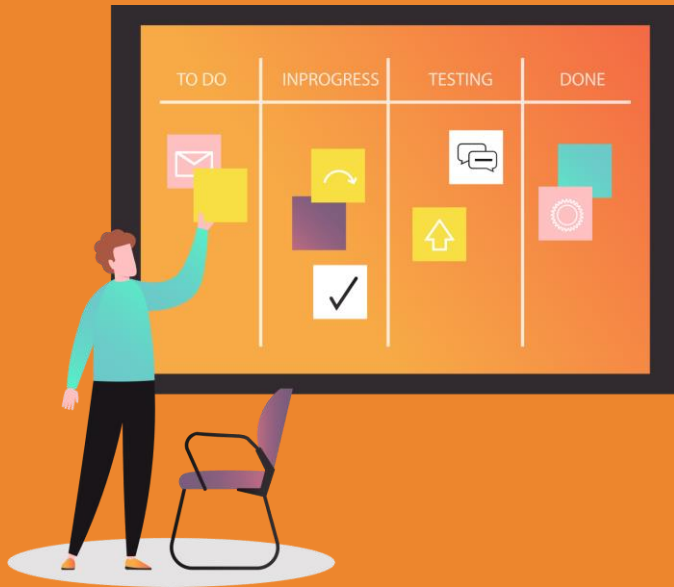
- Ambiguity related to managing conflict
Ambiguities in communication with stakeholders, and obtaining information from and getting access to stakeholders. Conflicts of interest between manager and the customer.

- Ambiguity related to managing expectations
Uncertainties around dealing with high or changing stakeholder expectations. For example, trying to manage a process when the customer changes the path first approved by both parties.

- Ambiguity related to stakeholder engagement
Involved ambiguities related to dealing with difficult stakeholders and handling disagreements. For example, a customer stated changes to a particular requirement, but didn't confirm them officially. Project manager received very late contradictory direction from major stakeholders. Contractor has not submitted a schedule going forward.

Sources of ambiguity in a project (4)

IV.   Ambiguities associated with managing the project's human resources

- Ambiguity related to human resources
  Uncertainties around the skill set and capabilities required to perform project tasks. These include new staff, personnel leaving or taking extended leave, working with an inexperienced or incompetent team member, and managing people who lacked commitment. For example, lack of responsiveness from team members.

- Ambiguity related to leadership
  For example, no support from upper management. Managers not wanting to listen to options, causing employees to be disgruntled.

- Ambiguity related to relational conflict
  Ambiguities around disagreements with coworkers. For example, dealing with a coworker who oversteps boundaries and gives advice to people above their position.

- Ambiguity related to task conflict
  Ambiguities around disagreements about how to carry out a task. For example, unavailability of entire team to meet at [the] same time. Differing views on how something should be designed.
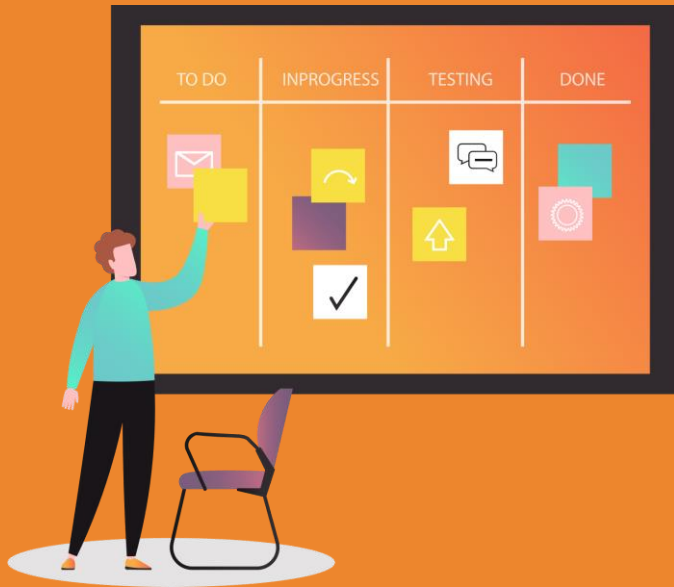
Sources of ambiguity in a project (5)

V.   Ambiguity stemming from insufficient task and role information

- Task ambiguity
Uncertainties related to limited information about project tasks. For example, uncertainty regarding document version to use among those listed in the system.

- Role ambiguity
Insufficient information about one's role (i.e., lack of role clarity). For example, no single owner for a crucial series of tasks. Not knowing the appropriate person to verify changes the team made to meet new compliance regulations. Multiple teams claiming ownership over projects.
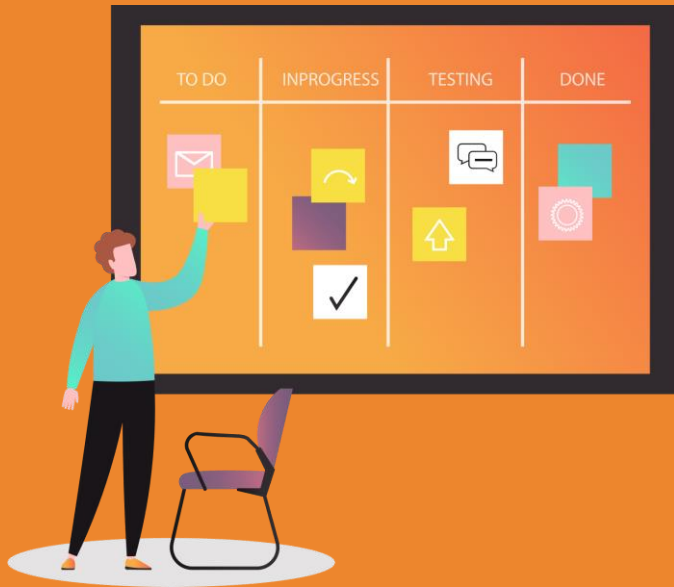
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