

DAY 3

The Triple Constraint

Scope, time, and cost: the balancing act at the heart of every project

1. The Core Idea

Every project is shaped by three connected limits: scope (what has to be delivered), time (how long it can take), and cost (how much it can spend). Together these are known as the triple constraint, sometimes drawn as a triangle with quality sitting at the center, since quality is what suffers when the three sides are pushed out of balance.

The key insight is that you cannot change one side of the triangle without affecting at least one of the others. This is not a theoretical idea; it is the single most common source of conflict on real projects, and understanding it is what separates a PM who can push back credibly from one who simply absorbs every request.

2. The Three Sides, Explained

Scope

Scope is the sum of all the work required to deliver the project's product, service, or result, and just as importantly, what is explicitly excluded. A clearly written scope statement is the single best defense against scope creep, the gradual, often unapproved expansion of a project beyond its original boundaries.

Time

The schedule: how long each piece of work will take, and the overall deadline the project is working toward. Time pressure is often the constraint stakeholders feel most viscerally, since a missed deadline is highly visible in a way that a quietly overspent budget sometimes is not.

Cost

The budget: the money, and by extension the people and resources, allocated to the project. Cost and time are closely linked, since adding people or working overtime to save time almost always costs more

money.

3. How the Trade-offs Actually Work

A practical way to think about the triangle: a stakeholder can typically fix any two sides, but the third then has to flex. If scope and deadline are both fixed, cost usually has to rise, more people, more overtime, or a smaller margin. If cost and deadline are both fixed, scope usually has to shrink. If scope and cost are both fixed, the timeline usually has to extend.

WORTH KNOWING

A phrase every PM should have ready: 'We can absolutely add that, but it means either the deadline moves, the budget increases, or something else currently in scope gets dropped. Which of those works for you?' This reframes an unplanned request as a decision the stakeholder makes with full information, rather than a quiet problem the PM absorbs alone.

4. Real-World Scenarios

Client adds a new feature mid-project, deadline unchanged	Cost or existing scope must flex; something else likely drops or the budget rises.
Sponsor moves the launch date earlier	Cost usually rises (more resources) or scope must shrink to hit the new date.
Budget gets cut mid-project	Scope must shrink, or the timeline extends to spread cost over more time.
Team delivers early and under budget	A rare, genuinely good outcome, often the result of strong planning in Day 2's Planning phase.

5. Quality: The Silent Fourth Side

Quality is often drawn at the center of the triangle because it is what absorbs the pressure when scope, time, and cost are forced out of balance without an honest conversation. A team squeezed on time and budget while scope stays fixed will often cut corners on testing, polish, or thoroughness, even if nobody explicitly decided to lower quality. Part of a PM's job is making that trade-off visible rather than letting it happen silently.

6. Reflection Questions

- Describe a time, in school, work, or personal life, when a deadline moved but the amount of work did not shrink. What happened to quality?
- If you were managing a project and a stakeholder asked for extra scope with no extra time or budget, what would you say to them?

- Why do you think scope creep is described as 'gradual and often unapproved' rather than a single big decision?

7. Key Terms Introduced Today

- Triple constraint — the interconnected limits of scope, time, and cost on a project.
- Scope creep — the uncontrolled expansion of a project's scope without corresponding adjustments to time, cost, or resources.
- Baseline — the originally approved version of the scope, schedule, or budget, used to measure changes against.

8. Looking Ahead

Tomorrow's final session of the week covers stakeholders and communication, how to identify who actually has influence over your project, and how to keep the right people informed without drowning everyone in unnecessary updates.