Scope creep: how to spot it and control change without saying no to everything

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Scope creep is the slow growth of a project through small additions nobody formally agreed to. Each one seems reasonable. Together they push dates, burn budget and wear teams out. Controlling it does not mean refusing change; it means making every change a visible trade-off.

TL;DR The short version

- Scope creep is a project growing through small additions nobody formally agreed, which push dates, burn budget and tire teams.
- Warning signs are growing work in progress and tickets with no link to an objective.
- Capture every request, assess its impact on time, cost, risk and quality, and answer with 'yes, and here is what it costs'.

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How it happens

- Vague objectives that let anything fit.
- "While you are in there, could you also…"
- Engineers adding polish or generality nobody asked for, sometimes called gold plating.
- Stakeholders who were not consulted early arriving with needs late.
- Requirements discovered during build that were never written down.

Early warning signs

- Work in progress keeps growing while finished work does not.
- Tickets appear with no link to an objective in the charter.
- Estimates for the same feature keep rising.
- The team cannot say what "done" means for the release.

A light change-control process

1. Capture every request in one place, however small.
2. Assess its impact on time, cost, risk and quality. Engineers estimate; they do not decide.
3. The accountable owner decides: accept and move something out, accept and move the date, defer, or decline.
4. Record the decision and tell the people affected.

In agile teams

An agile backlog is designed to absorb change, so creep looks different: the goal for the release quietly widens while the date stays fixed. Protect the iteration goal, and make the product owner trade items in and out of the release explicitly rather than only adding.

Saying it well

Replace "no" with "yes, and here is what it costs". For example: "We can add export to CSV. It takes about four days, so either the date moves to the 14th or audit logs move to the next release. Which do you prefer?"

Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. IICTP. TPBOK, Engineering Governance & Agile Delivery. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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