The Wednesday That Went Sideways

A Practical Field Guide for Federal Program Managers

Your day started with eight meetings, some breathing room, and a plan to catch up on overdue docs. Then reality showed up: a text from the boss at 8:15, a Congressional data call at 9:15, an unplanned vendor meeting that ate your 10:30 and spawned a follow-up requiring slides that didn't exist yet. By 6 p.m. you're editing a Congressional response at the kitchen table.

The question isn't whether your day will go sideways. It's whether you have a system for navigating it when it does. Four tools in this guide help you build that system.

In this guide:

TOOL 1 THE PM TRIAGE FRAMEWORK

When something unexpected lands, run it through two questions before you move: How urgent is this? How significant is the impact on your program?

The PM Triage Framework

	HIGH URGENCY	LOW URGENCY
HIGH IMPACT	**Act Now** Own it immediately. Set a hard end-time. Protect the rest of your day.	**Schedule It** Block time this week. Assign an owner if possible. Flag dependencies early.
LOW IMPACT	**Delegate It** Hand off with clear context. Set the deliverable explicitly. Check in once.	**Let It Go** Decline or defer with a reason. Document briefly. Don't revisit unless escalated.

TOOL 2 ASK BEFORE YOU ACT

When a request lands out of nowhere — especially from someone without full visibility into your program — don't just say yes and run. Three questions get you aligned before you spend a minute going in the wrong direction.

1. What does done look like?
Deliverable, format, level of detail — before you build anything.

2. When do you actually need this?
"ASAP" isn't a deadline. Get a specific time — it changes everything.

3. Who else should know I'm on this?
Surfaces dependencies and protects you from duplicated effort.

> **TIP** *If the person tasking you can't clearly answer what "done" looks like or when they need it, that's your cue to slow down and clarify before you build.*

TOOL 3 THE DAILY PLANNING RITUAL

A weekly check-in isn't enough in high-tempo environments. A daily ritual — three micro-moments totaling under 10 minutes — keeps you ahead of the day instead of behind it.

Morning Check-In

5 min — before your first meeting

- Name your one non-negotiable today
- Identify your highest-risk window
- Flag anything likely to land on your team
- Pre-decide what you'd move if something urgent hits

Midday Reset

2 min — hard stop, mid-afternoon

- What's shifted since this morning?
- What's been buried since 9am?
- Who needs a heads-up before EOD?
- Is your team overloaded or under-informed?

End-of-Day Close

3 min — before you leave or log off

- What didn't happen — and why?
- What carries forward? Does your team know?
- One thing to do first tomorrow
- Any open loops that'll cost you in the morning?

> **TIP** *The Midday Reset is the most skipped and the most valuable. Two minutes of stepping back — not checking email — changes the quality of every decision you make that afternoon.*

TOOL 4 REAL-TIME RECOVERY MOVES

When the day breaks anyway — and it will — these moves help you recover without losing the rest of it.

MOVE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHEN TO USE IT
The 90-Second Brief	Call or text one team member: here's what landed, here's what I need, here's the deadline.	When a high-urgency task arrives and only you have the context.
The Explicit Cancel	A 15-second message cancels a meeting. Not showing up is never the right call.	When your schedule collapses. Cancel with notice — always.
The Batch Update	Send one 3-line status to key stakeholders — proactively, not after they chase you.	When you're unavailable and multiple items are outstanding.
The Debrief Ask	Spend 5 minutes: what did we handle well, what would we do differently?	After a chaotic day. Debrief fast, while it's fresh.

YOUR COMMITMENT

START
One new practice I'll begin this week:

STOP
One unproductive habit I'll drop:

CONNECT
My accountability partner:

