Checklist:
How to Talk About a Project That Went Wrong

1 Select Your Example

- Choose a real project challenge you actively managed.
- Avoid safety, ethical, or legal issues.
- Make sure it shows transferable skills.

Tip: Think variations, delays, or cost issues you helped fix.

CA Example: On a high-rise residential development, multiple client-driven design changes began generating a high volume of variation claims and inconsistencies in cost tracking. You selected this example because you were responsible for assessing variations, managing subcontractor submissions, and improving commercial reporting processes to maintain cost transparency and reduce claim disputes.

2 Explain the Challenge

- State the project, your role, and context.
- Be objective ie. what went wrong, why, and contributing factors.
- Don't blame anyone.

Tip: Keep it clear and balanced. Show awareness of all angles.

PM Example: While delivering a residential tower project, facade installation delays began impacting the critical path due to procurement lead times, design coordination gaps, and subcontractor resourcing pressures. You explain the program constraints, client expectations, and trade sequencing challenges while demonstrating awareness of the multiple project and supply chain factors at play.

3 Show Your Response

- List specific actions you took.
- Highlight communication & collaboration.
- Show initiative, problem-solving, accountability.

Tip: Structure actions logically eg. audits, process fixes, team alignment.

CA Example: You conducted a detailed audit of design revisions and subcontractor variation submissions to spot inconsistencies and duplication risks. You then set up a structured variation register aligned with procurement and site progress, and ran recurring review meetings with the builder, consultants, and subcontractors to improve cost visability, streamline claim assessment, and speed up approvals.

4 Discuss the Outcome

- Be honest about results.
- Highlight measurable improvements.
- Avoid exaggeration.

Tip: Even partial successes count. Show impact clearly.

PM Example: Although the original program completion date could not be fully recovered, you reduced forecast delays by resequencing works with site and subcontractor teams, adjusting procurement staging, and securing extra trade resources. You kept clients in the loop with updated forecasts and clear mitigation strategies.

5 Highlight What You Learned

- What did you learn professionally?
- How do you apply it to future projects?
- Show growth, resilience, and process improvements.

Tip: Mention how you share lessons with your team.

CA Example: The project reinforced the need for structured change management and variation tracking from day one. Since then, you've introduced early-stage variation control frameworks and strengthened communication with consultant and subcontractors improving clarity and reducing downstream claim risks on future projects.

6 Delivery Tips

- Use **challenge → action → outcome → learning** flow.
- Keep it structured, concise, and confident.
- Practice aloud before the interview.

PM Example: When preparing for interviews, you practice delivering your response using a clear challenge, action, outcome, and learning structure. You focus on explaining how you assessed program risks, collaborated with stakeholders to implement recovery strategies, and applied lessons learned to improve future project planning and trade engagement.

For in-depth details click here