

Project Approval Games: Three Fantasies



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Both executives and project managers kid themselves about what really goes on during the project approval process. Let's look at two executive fantasies and one PM fantasy and see how they cripple projects.

The project approval process varies from organization to organization. In some, it is a rational process of strategic and tactical planning. In others, it is a highly charged political game where PMs keep their backs to the wall to avoid the random dagger from behind. Whatever the environment, there are two classic fantasies that executives play whenever the phrase "project approval" is mentioned... and then there is the game PMs play to cope with executives' demands.

Executive Fantasy Land

Project sponsors and high-level stakeholders think that if they had really good project managers the approval process would go like this:

The project manager strides confidently to the front of the Board Room. The long table before the PM is filled with corporate big shots. The PM makes one rock solid commitment after another. There is no whining about contingencies or risks. The PM listens politely to a question about budget and the completion date and then says, "We WILL complete the project for \$3,123,876.56 and the last of our 1,347 tasks will end on March 9th, 2005 at 3:42 PM."

As the executives applaud, the project manager holds up a hand to silence them and says, "That's Eastern Standard Time," and flashes a shy smile as the executives go wild.

Relying on this fantasy of a really good project manager, executives believe that projects have no risk. Budgets and the completion dates can be set in stone and any failure to hit them means that someone goofed off and did not do their duty to the organization.

In this fantasyland, a project is a machine. The executives push buttons and twirl some dials and the project machine spits out the result on time and within budget. Sponsors give project managers the budgets and completion dates it will all come true with a little hard work. If an executive wants a project result early it's just a matter of twisting the due date dial.

This fantasy triggers a lot of destructive executive behavior:

- ❑ Forcing change after change on a project and then feeling personally betrayed when it is late and over budget.
- ❑ Treating a project manager as a fool and a liar when they cannot get a finish date commitment at the first planning meeting.
- ❑ Sneering at requests for budget and duration extensions which are a sign of weakness and sloth.

The Used Car Lot

In other organizations, the roles and schema surrounding the project approval process resemble transactions on a sleazy used car lot. The executives are the innocent customers and the PM is a slick shyster in fancy clothes. Here the approval process goes like this:

The executives stroll onto the used car lot, looking for simple but effective transportation. No high-powered hot rods, no fancy wheel covers or custom interiors, just a basic car to carry the executives where they want to go. The PM slithers out from under a rock and wraps an arm around all the executives. "I've got just the thing for sports like you," the PM says in an oily voice.

"We are not 'sports'," the executives say. "We just want a basic car; something simple and cheap."

"That's what I was saying," the PM says with a snicker. "Let me show you this beauty; I've been saving it for just the right customer." The PM leads the executives toward a far corner of the lot.

On the way, one of the executives spots a simple economy model and says, "Wait, that's what we want!"

The PM sneers, "Everyone will laugh at you if you drive that wreck. It's outdated, antiquated and uses '80s technology. You'll be laughing-stocks and die a lonely, miserable death."

Scared at making a mistake, the executives follow the PM to a dark corner of the car lot. The PM pulls an enormous drop cloth off a vehicle, saying, "Here's what you want!"

The executives peer into the gloom and see an enormous vehicle that will carry far too many people. The interior is plush leather, there are three stereo systems, 12 speakers, a TV and a wet bar.

The executives chorus, "This is too much, too big, too expensive. We want the little car back there!"

The PM starts to talk, waving complex charts and graphs and saying, "This is the latest technology, the best economy and the. . ."

The PM's pitch mesmerizes and hypnotizes the executives. A few minutes later, they drive off in the big expensive monster.

This fantasy also triggers a lot of destructive executive behavior:

- ❑ Sponsors review project plans with a fine-toothed comb, searching for unwanted and unneeded features, options and fixtures.
- ❑ Every number a project manager presents is a lie and cutting their duration and cost estimates is just getting rid of all the padding.
- ❑ Project managers hide tasks in their projects to give their friends mini-vacations at work, usually 33% of all the tasks fall in this category and can be eliminated with no consequence.

The Eager Puppy Dog

Too many PMs play the eager puppy dog in project presentations to stay out of trouble. The approval discussion goes like this:

The sponsor says, "I think this budget looks just a tad fat. You can get it done for 20% less, can't you?"

The PM nods like an eager puppy and hurries off to slash the budget by 20%. The easiest way is to reduce the work and time in each task 20%. The PM is able to return with the lower budget and, as a bonus, a shorter duration; proving that the PM is not a slick shyster and that the project will be a machine.

When the session ends, both the sponsor and the PM have learned a lesson. The sponsor has learned that the PM's plans have a lot of fat built in and next time, the cut will be 30%, not just 20%. The PM has learned a lesson too. Next time the plan will be 25% padded so that arbitrary changes do not cripple the effort before it even starts.

Rebel Without a Clue

Still other project managers go into project approval meetings ready for battle. Holding a clenched fist into the air these rebel PMs say to the assembled team members, "I will fight for our plan, those nitwits in suits will not change one bit of the brilliant plan we have put together."

The rebel then heads for the meeting room for the session with his boss and his boss's boss and he executive whose signature is on the PM's paycheck. The discussion goes like this:

An executive asks, "What will it take to finish a month earlier? We have two other competitive initiatives and I would like all three to hit the market at the same time."

The PM says, "Finishing earlier is impossible! There is no way we can finish any earlier than June 30th and even that will require so much overtime from the team that many will lose their families. No way; we can't do it!"

The controller says, "I'd like to see a little less use of consultants and lower fees. Don't we have internal people who could do some of this work; maybe work with the consultants?"

The rebel answers, "Impossible, we need their expertise and I have negotiated their fees down to a fraction of what they charge other companies."

The executives huddle for moment and the PM waits behind the podium.

Then the most senior executive says, "We approve the project with a completion date of April 30th and a budget that is \$25,000 less than yours. We're also more than willing to find another PM if you can't hit those targets."

The rebel explains the executives' treachery and no one learns any lessons.

Summary

The key to project approval meetings is to be ready with options and alternatives for finishing earlier, spending less money and using alternative resources. Good project managers are eager to change the plan to fit executives' needs and preference so long as the scope, budget and

duration are feasible. Learn to create these tradeoffs in our [one-on-one courses](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).