

Status Reports that Stupefy



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Summary: All too often executives languish with little if any decision-making information from project status reports. Let's look at a bad status report and then look at what should be done.

The #1 complaint executives have about project managers is their status reports. Actually, the complaint is really about the regularity of big, bad surprises that occur in the last couple of weeks when it is too late to do anything about it. It's the late of early warning on problems that really gripes them. As do the words "There is nothing we can do about it."

Let's look at the techniques used by project managers that leave executives feeling that they know less about the project's status after the meeting than they did before it started. Let's look at the ingredients for status reports that stupefy and then explore the right way to do it.

"Everything's Great! We're in green light status!"

Project dashboards are in vogue and they really give executives the feeling that they are in command of a precisely engineered with scientific measurement of every aspect of project performance, sort of like the instrumentation at NASA. But there the gauges are connected to the space craft and measure what's really going on second to second.

Project dash boards, on the other hand are connected to wishes, hopes, dreams and judgments about how much bad news people think they can report without being beheaded. The dashboard concept spirals into uselessness due to three. First, the dashboard is based on subjective judgments not measurements and data. Second, inept project managers and executives have a bad habit of becoming angry and even yelling when they hear that a task or project will be late. The say to themselves...

- ❑ If I tell them that there is no way I can finish on time and that I'll be three weeks late they will yell and I'll get into trouble...
- ❑ Of course, we could have a breakthrough, well more like a miracle that will let me finish on time
- ❑ I'll go with the miracle

These decisions will eventually require full disclosure unless a miracle finish occurs. But it doesn't take long before a particularly observant executive will ask the question, "Since 73% of our projects finish late, why don't I ever see a yellow or red light until 10 days before the due date we're "suddenly" going to miss?"

This is a very good question that we gloss over by moving on to happier thoughts with a dollop of...

"The Girl Scout Cookie Approach"

With the executive dazed from the flashing lights of the dashboard, we can move on to trigger a diabetic coma with some sweets. This technique works best if the PM has freckles, large dimples and a smile as sweet as honeysuckle but any PM can try it after plastering a caring, nurturing look on their face. These PMs schmooze over awkward questions by reporting that,

- "Everyone's getting along really, really well" and
- "The team's pulling together like you would not believe."
- "Everyone is pitching in to help others solve their difficulties."

Certainly, team morale is an important project management issue but wise executive wonders what's actually going on behind the team spirit.

Any questions about the objective state of the project are met with a disapproving frown and words like;

- "Criticizing people who are doing their best and trying really, really hard doesn't help" a gasp and tears are good here.
- "We're focusing on building a high performance team first

"Those jerks on the 6th floor have screwed us again"

The next technique for stupefying executives is paranoid finger-pointing at other departments or functional units. The dazzling lights of the dash board and the sugar overdose of nurturing may not have numbed the executive brain. So a wily project manager may turn to wild, undocumented accusations of treachery in IT, Sales or Operations. They hope this propaganda will distract the executive from considering how very little real information has been communicated thus far. If the turf warrior hidden inside the executive is roused, so much the better. Then the remainder of the status meeting can be devoted to finger-point at anyone not in attendance.

Stupefying Status Spring from a Bad Foundation

We build the foundation for good status reporting starting on the first day we work on the project plan. If these elements are not laid down early in the effort it is impossible to fix them once work has begun.

The first foundation is a planning based on deliverables with quantified acceptance criteria like,

- "98% of the customer service reps score 80% or higher on the test at the end of training"
- Average response time to display a complete customer history is less than 2.4 seconds

When we decompose our scope into a work breakdown structure composed of measured achievements we get lots of benefits in making assignments, estimating and in tracking. We get none of these benefits and we'll deliver stupefying status reports if the WBS is activities like

- Train the customer service rep

- Improve network response time

Using measured achievements give us the ability to track accurately because we can objectively determine where we are and measure if a deliverable is complete. When we plan this way we also have much smaller WBS because we are holding people accountable for end result.

The second element in the foundation is estimate to complete status reporting. This has a couple of requirements. First the schedule must be based on estimates of work not just finish dates. That is easier than it sounds when the WBS is composed of measureable deliverables. Planning with work estimates is also a best practice used by anybody whose career success comes from finishing projects on time. Because it lets us spot problems early when they are small.

Second, we need weekly status reports with estimates to complete. That is, people tell us how many hours they spent on their task or tasks and how many hours of work remain. This combination lets us spot and solve problems when they are small and easier to fix. It also allows us to give executives solid quantitative data on where the project and each task stands as of time of the report. Of course, if we did all these things, our user/client/boss could exercise strategic control over the projects we do for them.

We teach those techniques in our [1-on-1 web classes](#). They allow you to learn at your own pace and schedule while working 1-on-1 with an expert PM who answers your questions and gives feedback with 24 hours, 7 days a week.