

How to Spot Project Problems Early



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Project managers can't ID problems until they are big and its too late to fix them.

1. Mushy Check points
2. Gathering bad status data
3. Doing it the right way
4. Bad news behavior

Project managers are supposed to spot problems early and fix them. But far too often the tracking process hides big problems until it's too late to avoid real damage. Bad surprises late in a project make executives crazy and kill a PM's credibility. Why does this happen? It's a combination of:

- Don't know where we are or where we should be
- Team members don't report bad news quickly
- Too much status report optimism

Mushy Check Points

Project managers and executives start the tracking problem when they plan the project. The boss asks the PM to, "straighten out the supply room by the end of August." The PM nods, recruits several team members and they start work. The PM makes a long list of "to do's," like:

1. Throw out obsolete supplies
2. Order needed supplies
3. Keep track of usage
4. Make People tell us when we about to run out
- 5.etc.

Then the PM assigns a due date, usually by backing in to the end of August date the boss specified.

The project manager is left to track the completion of those vague "to do" items and activities which everyone defines in their own way. That is the all too typical foundation we build

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for tracking the project. Let's see what happens when the project manager tries to spot problems.

Gathering Status Data From the Team

Each week the PM gathers status information to report to the sponsor. The PM holds a status meeting and asks each team member how their tasks are coming along and if they will finish by the due date. If a team member expresses confusion on their assignment, the PM blames them for not asking questions. If they mention that they may just miss the due date the PM usually accuses them of slacking off and letting down the team. Soon no one admits any problems and everyone reports that they are on schedule and in "green light" status.

When the PM reports to the sponsor, anything but good news gets a snarl. The PM soon resorts to saying, "Everything is going according to plan," or "Every task is in 'green light' status." The problems just fester until it becomes clear that the date and business result are a fiction. By then, it is too late to solve the problems.

Doing It the Right Way

How should the PM and project executive build a plan that lets them track the project and solve problems early? First, they define the scope as a deliverable with acceptance criteria that are measurable. As an example, when the boss tells a PM that the supply room is a mess and we run out of office supplies too often, the PM should ask questions to define the deliverable in terms like, "Find stock items in less than 15 seconds with less than 2 outages of stock item per month.

Then they build a network of deliverables down to the level of individual assignments. Each is defined with acceptance criteria like, "Focus group of five employees can find 7 items in less than 10 seconds each." That is the criteria for organizing the shelves.

That tells the team members what's expected; so they know what a good job is before they start work. We can make better work estimates now and use those to track progress.

With these metrics, the PM can track progress against unambiguous and measurable checkpoints and compare hours of work completed to the estimated hours. Those tools let us spot problems early. If a team member reports 8 hours of work completed against a baseline of 30 hours. We know where

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we are particularly if the team member also gives us an estimate to complete of 35 hours. Then we know the task will take 43 hours instead of the planned 30. But we find out about the problem well before the task is actually late, so we can do something about it.

However, the PM has to exhibit good "bad news behavior" which encourages team members to report problems as soon as they occur. The PM can't get angry about bad news. If that happens people will avoid telling you about problems. So when a team member reports a problem we react calmly and treat it as a problem we have to solve jointly. Then people will continue to tell us about problems.

All this lets the project manager report this way to the sponsor:

Status of task 22: As of last Friday, this task was 23% complete rather than the planned 42% complete due the absence of the focus group members due to a snowstorm. Without corrective action, we will finish this task 5 days late. That will cause three successor tasks to start late and postpone the project completion by 4 days. I propose the following corrective action..."

This status report has several good features. First, we are reporting status on an objectively measurable business achievement. Second, it quantitatively compares "where we are as of today" to "where we should be, as of today." Third, our progress assessment is based on the hours of work completed as of last Friday and estimates of the hours of work remaining as of that day. Fourth, the executive is receiving data on 3 quantified dimensions of status (the level of achievement, the duration and the budget), not just the due date.

These elements set up the second half of the status report where the PM lays out data regarding what we can do about the problem. Having three quantified dimensions for each assignment (deliverable, date & work hours) lets the PM develop quantified alternatives for executive decision-making. These alternatives might continue the status report as follows:

"We have three options for recovery. First, we can hire an outside team to be the focus group. This option would allow us to recapture the lost days of duration but will increase the budget by \$500. Second,..."

The PM proposes alternatives that involve trade-offs between the level of achievement, duration and budget. The project

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executive can make a decision from the options because the PM has seen this problem from a long way off and has plotted evasive action. The most important feature is that all this is happening before the task is late.

Summary

The foundation for effective status reporting is laid during the planning of a project where we conceive unambiguous deliverables and checkpoints for measuring progress. This process is the heart of the methodology we teach in our [individual online courses](#) and [in-person group seminars](#)

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