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## Project Team: Moments of Truth and Marching Behind the Elephant



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**Summary: Three moments of truth (MOT) with your project team determine their motivation, work attitudes and performance. Blow those MOTs and you'll be like the poor sap who marches behind the elephant at the circus.**

The difference between a high performance team and one that performs poorly is often determined by three moments of truth (MOT) with the project team.

Handled properly, these MOTs produce team members who actually try to finish assignments early and who take responsibility for solving problems and figuring out better, faster ways of completing their achievements. Handled badly these MOTs yield a team with little incentive to do anything but avoid blame for the failure of the project.

### **MOT #1 Team Commitment to Their Assignments**

The first MOT comes early, during the project planning phase when you're building the plan and schedule. If you follow the best practices during this phase, you'll work with your team to define their assignments, make clear the deliverable they will produce and how you will measure its acceptability. Then working with the team member, you'll estimate how much work the deliverable will require, speak to their boss and pin down availability and calculate the duration from that data. The team member has input and you strive to reach consensus on the estimate. That's the best practice way of estimating and it helps build team member's commitment to the assignment. You want to gain commitment this way but some things can get in the way.

During your initiation meeting, where you first met with the sponsor, that executive was quite clear that the completion date had to be the end of June. The sponsor was adamant about the date and every time you saw that executive all you heard were reminders about the June date.

Now as you get deeper and deeper into the planning it becomes glaringly obvious that finishing all these tasks by the end of June is impossible. Not just tough but

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mathematically impossible, even with lots of additional resources. You are waiting for exactly the right moment to tell the sponsor about the impossibility of the desired date. You're also kind of hoping for a breakthrough that will make the date feasible. At the same time, you start working with the team on estimating their tasks. You hope you might only have to explain a month of slippage on the June date but now it sounds like ski season will be at its peak before the project is done. This is the dilemma of the first Moment of Truth. A project manager can confront the sponsor with the truth about the date and take the heat or...

The temptation at this point is to postpone the pain of the confrontation and show the sponsor acceptable dates by backing into the schedule from the completion date. That is, start from the sponsor's desired completion date and work backward, plucking completion dates from the sky as you go, like this; "Jack has to be finished by June 23 so Mary has to be finished by June 5th and Pearl has to be done by May 19..." When you are done the project meets the sponsor's date constraint. Then you go tell the team when their assignments have to be finished. If they protest you either blame the sponsor directly or shrug and point up to the executive floor. This way the project schedule (on paper) finishes precisely on the date the sponsor wants and that makes the executive happy with you, at least for a while. And you may be whispering to yourself, "We're smart and hard working, maybe we can finish by then."

This technique is widely used and in some organizations plucking dates backwards is a "Best PM Practice." Of course these organizations also have 70% failure rates on projects. More to the point, the imaginary finish dates for the tasks you plucked from the sky cause you to fail at Moment of Truth #1.

Your project team feels plucked themselves. The younger and more innocent members of the team are discouraged, knowing that they will fail to finish on time. The more experienced team members also know they'll finish late but their experience tells them that they will also get to spend months after the project's "finish" date cleaning up the mess they frantically slapped together in the vain attempt to finish "on-time."

Worst of all, what kind of commitment do you get from your team from this kind of process? People who know they have no chance of hitting their "committed to" results have little dedication or enthusiasm for their tasks. Even if you apply every ounce of creativity the team can muster to squeeze the plan and develop shortcuts and innovations that slash the duration, 99.9% of the time these efforts will still fall short of the sponsor's completion date expectation. This leads us to Moment of Truth #2.

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## **MOT #2, "Do You Want the Bad News Now or Later?"**

The second Moment of Truth on all projects comes at an early meeting of the project team. One of the members says to you, "I'm gonna finish a week, maybe two, later than planned." Visions of the whole project collapsing flash through your mind. You've come to MOT #2 and there are choices here too.

This bad news may tie your stomach into knots because the slipping task is on the critical path and thus pushes the project completion date out. It's also very easy to greet this bad news as a personal betrayal by the project team member, in other words, something for which they are to be blamed. So the PM gets angry with the team member which ends the flow of information. There are PMs who think this refusal to listen to bad news is a sign that they are dynamic and aggressive leaders. The truth is just the opposite. When PMs behave like this they teach team members with slipping tasks, and every other team member, not to give them bad news. From then on, the team will use a lot more optimism when reporting the status of their assignments. That PM who doesn't listen to bad news dooms himself to learning about big problems when it's too late to fix them.

Hard as it is to do, you need to handle bad news positively, with appreciation for the opportunity to solve a problem. The team member with a variance is often not to blame and even if they are the culprit, you shouldn't let on that you've reached that conclusion. You handle the variance as a problem you and the team member have to jointly solve. You want the team members to continue to trust you. Then you get the exceedingly valuable opportunity to solve a small problem early. If you discourage your team members from giving you bad news, you doom yourself to discovering problems when it's too late to recover.

## **MOT #3, "Micromanagement Rears Its Ugly Head."**

Even if you manage to handle the bad news properly, you still have a problem to solve and that is MOT #3. The temptation for many technically savvy PMs is to dive right in, take over and solve the problem. They proceed to make all the decisions, which for many PMs is a very comfortable position; much easier than giving the team room to make mistakes and own their results. They even relish the line of team members that forms outside their cubicle for decisions. You know the micromanagement disease is raging when these PMs start complaining about how their team members, "lack initiative and the ability to work independently." Of course, none of the team has any ownership of any result or any chance to have any feeling of achievement.

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It's so easy to make all the decisions and leave the team as your drones that many PMs fall prey to micromanaging when problems emerge. You want to "make things happen, now!" So you stick your fingers into everyone's assignments. You may have built a commitment foundation where the team feels accountable for their achievements. But as soon as you take over, checking their work every few hours and making decisions, you wash away that foundation.

It is enormously difficult to keep your hands off people's assignments when the sponsor is putting a great deal of pressure about missed deadlines and budget overruns. But that is exactly the moment at which you need the benefit of a project team that feels accountable for their achievements and has some incentive to meet and, hopefully, exceed their assignments.

## Summary

When you succeed in each of these three Moments of Truth, we substantially increase the likelihood of project success. Each of the MOTs involves both personal leadership techniques and sound project management processes. Learn these processes and [our best practices project methodology](#) in our 1-on-1 individual learning classes where you'll interact with sponsors and team members in role-playing exercises with your instructor. Whenever you have a question you can telephone or e-mail your instructor and always get a response within 24 hours.