

Project Manager as Custom-tailor



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Project managers who can custom tailor a project to fit an executive's business value needs have a lot more credibility and get more support than those who get lost in the technical details.

Project approval processes are effective when PMs tailor projects to fit the sponsor's needs. Here's an example of an ineffective approval process.

PM's thoughts	Executive's thoughts
Overview of the project	
<p>"We've killed ourselves putting this plan together and I'm going to fight to the death to get it approved."</p>	<p>"What's this barrage of techno-babble and super-geek details? This stuff is supposed to convince me that this project is "just exactly what I need!" Well, it sounds too good to be true. Whatever happened to those business issues we discussed during the first meeting?"</p>
Details of the project plan	
<p>"I'm a real bear for tight control and this schedule will show them we've anticipated everything and really know our business."</p>	<p>"I'm on a journey into a microscopic world of incomprehensible detail they call the project plan. There are so many acronyms, so much technical lingo that this has to come from a distant planet. I can't make out even the dimmest outline of how the organization will benefit. I better move ask some questions about this project's duration and cost."</p>
A few questions about duration and budget	
<p>"How dare they challenge our budget and duration! We spent weeks and after ten minutes they want to cut it."</p>	<p>"Wow, a couple of questions about alternatives and I'm facing a mother bear protecting her young. We should be able to explore ways of getting this faster and/or cheaper. "</p>
Hurrah! The project's approved!	
<p>"This is the thanks I get. Sure, shorten it and cut it some more!</p>	<p>I have so little idea about what this project is going to deliver that I better tighten down on the budget and duration. Let them</p>

Then you manage this disaster!

pout and sulk. I know I can track time and cost and these people need to be focused on something."

What went wrong?

There is plenty of fault here on both sides. _The PM provided no data on alternatives for the executive's or client's decision-making. So they made decisions without data on the trade-offs in the project. _Both sides proceeded all the way to a detailed plan without a network of measurable business achievements. _The executives/clients did not enforce any strategic protocol for conceiving the project. _The PM tried to "sell" and "fight for" the project plan instead of custom tailoring alternatives. _PM's project software technique made it nearly impossible to model alternative ways of completing the project _The PM was unwilling to present trade-offs between budget, risk, duration and alternative objectives

The project manager now has a client or project executive who has little understanding about what they'll get and little confidence that it will be a valuable business outcome. They all may have a combination of project objectives, budget and duration that is impossible to deliver. Last, they are wide open to scope changes as an uncomfortable executive micro-manages the project.

Selling the plan...Fighting for the plan

This mindset of selling a project is misguided. Executives and clients usually resist the idea of being "sold" a project. PMs need to present sufficient data and alternatives so the client or executive can convince themselves that this is the right project for the organization. Fighting for the plan is equally off the mark. The project executive always outranks the PM and a client signs your invoice. The idea of fighting with these people is at best a career-limiting move.

But if we don't fight or sell, how do we get approval and how do we avoid the death spiral of an impossible-to-deliver project? The answer is the project manager as custom tailor. The customer gets options from the custom tailor; "To cover that unsightly paunch, Sir, we'll need another three yards of material for \$200 or we can just let it hang over the waistband." The executive is given quantified choices and selects the combination of options they want; "We can finish 2 months earlier and cut the budget by 12% if we aim for 97% accuracy rather than 99%.

Measured achievements and trade-offs

The alternative above is one of several trade-off options and to quantify them we need a strong foundation that comes in two parts. First, the project plan must be built upon a network of the client's or project executive's measured achievements. Not the technical achievements of the project team but the business result that the client or executive wants (High-level Achievements, HLA™). The project executive or client understands these achievements because they are defined in their business terms not the technical lingo of the project team (See "Conceiving and negotiating strategic-level projects" on our website).

This achievement network lets the client or executive know exactly what they're buying. It also keeps the presentation at a strategic level, which is where clients and executives want to operate. By structuring the project with these business relevant outcomes, we also give executives clear and unambiguous checkpoints for controlling the project at a strategic level rather than micro-managing it.

The second part of avoiding this project death spiral is that project managers must provide trade-offs in the project plan presentation. Since the beginning of recorded project management history, two questions have been asked in every project approval presentation ever made. These questions are, "How can we do it cheaper?" and "How can we finish sooner?" Yet, project managers continue to be stunned and defensive when clients or project executives ask these questions. This is not the time to fight for the budget and completion date you crafted. Rather, this is the time to present the principal tradeoffs in the project plan. If we have developed a "4-corners project plan" we have quantified:

- ❑ the project's business result, its Measure of Success (MOS™)
- ❑ the budget,
- ❑ the duration and
- ❑ the level of confidence in achieving the above combination.

By defining these four quantified dimensions of the project, we're able to quantify the trade-offs between them. We can answer those two questions that are always asked, possibly even before the client or project executive asks them. We can offer a smaller business result for a lower budget. We can discuss a shorter duration or higher level of confidence in finishing on time and budget and make explicit the trade-offs between them. Why would a project manager ever do this? Why run the risk of getting approval for a different project than the one you planned? Because this gives the client or project executive the ability to tailor the project to their business needs.

There are many benefits from presenting quantified project trade-offs. _First, we allow executives to make decisions about the project before we start. Rather than selling them something, we are providing them with the data so they can craft a project that meets their business needs.

Second, by presenting the trade-offs we also have a much better chance of ensuring that the combination of business result, budget and duration are feasible. This lets us avoid projects where we know on the first date of work that there's no chance of meeting the budget, duration, project achievement combination.

Third, rather than selling "one best way" of doing the project, the PM is providing the client or project executive with a reasonable number of options and alternatives from which they can choose. This is a far stronger foundation for a strategic partnership with the client or executive than when they feel they have been "sold" a project.

Project software as a tool for modeling alternatives

Quantifying trade-offs is a time consuming task, particularly when we use project management software to carve the project plan into an unchangeable piece of granite. Rather, we need to plan projects with resource-driven scheduling. This lets us use the software as a simulation tool to model the impact of alternative patterns of resource allocation, predecessor relationships and costs. With this approach each change to a resources availability or capacity changes the whole schedule and we can quickly identify the impact of adding more programmers, changing a predecessor or hiring contractors for some of the work. (Visit our Project Repository for articles and books on these subjects).

Summary

The foundation for effective client, user or executive decision making during the approval process is measurable business achievements and trade-offs. They give clients and executives real control over the project because with them PMs can provide the data that clients/executives need to select the precise set of options that meet their business needs. For further information on this [Achievement-driven Project Methodology](#), visit our site and look at our web-based and in-person training programs on these techniques.