

"Fast-Food" Project Management



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When our project planning with customers is like letting them order at a fast-food drive-up window, we get an endless list of requirements. Then we can't control scope, finish on time or produce any business value. Customers may be happy when we start fast but are dissatisfied at the end when they get little of value.

When we work with organizations with track records of consistent project failure, we always find order-taking not planning at the "front end" of their project. Instead of thinking about business value and focusing on results, we see project order-taking, just like the drive-up window of a fast food burger joint. Let's see how this order-taking works.

Fast Food Order-Taking at "Projects Are Us"

The project manager stands at the drive-up window wearing a red and yellow cap that says "Projects Are Us." The executive drives up in a shiny black car, stops at the drive-up window and says, "I want to start a project and finish by March, 30th."

- ❑ The project manager nods eagerly, gives the executive the "thumbs up" signal and screams at the project team;
- ❑ "You two, put some new software on the grill!"
- ❑ "Dan, dump some training into the deep fry!"
- ❑ "Monica, we need more cubicles and a computer room now!"

The executive mutters, "Wow" at how quickly the fast food project team has started work. Just what the exec loves, no needless meetings or project paper work.

The project manager "order-taker" gives another toothy grin to the executive and says, "We've started work on your project and it will be ready very soon." Now the order-taker displays his technical expertise and dives into the specifications. "Would you like a network with 30 nano-second response time and 50 gigamondo disk drives? Can we add mauve wall coverings in the computer room? How about multi-lingual training?"

The executive frowns in confusion, "I'm on a budget, you know."

The project management order-taker grins and says, "No problem we're flexible. I can make any changes you want and we'll cut back to one language in the training."

The executive frowns, "As I think about it, forget the new systems, give me 4 new products but I'm in a hurry so speed it up."

The project manager whirls to face the project team, saying, "Let's go! Get those system diagrams off the desks, cancel the hardware and toss the color wheel into the trash. We need new product ideas pronto. Let's get to it!"

The PM smiles at the executive, brimming with pride at their marvelous responsiveness. Yes, they truly are customer-oriented and customer service does come first. Then, the PM shows the executive the first new product schematic.

The executive looks at the drawing with a sneer, "You just don't get it. I want high tech products, get rid of these old ideas and get me high tech ideas. And once again, you're late. Get a move on! You're headed for yet another project failure."

Happy Executives at the Beginning... or at the End

The sad thing about this order-taking approach is that it makes some executives and users happy at the beginning because the project team starts so fast. But the odds of the PM delivering a successful project and having a satisfied executive at the end are just about zero. In addition the PM's order-taking approach starts a process where there are changes each week, even after the original due date is a distant memory. Why? Because the order-taking planning process does not produce a scope definition that we can objectively measure or a project scope we can control. In other words, order-taking does not make the executive commit to what he/she wants. All it does is give the PM a list which will keep changing. A poorly informed executive is delighted by order-taking before the project begins and dissatisfied when it's late, over budget and delivers nothing of value.

Order-taking PMs think they are building a strong relationship and credibility with executives. But when PMs act like order-takers that's how the executives perceive them. Is this PM an integral part of the executive's program? No, the PM's work is no different from any other fast food operation.

What's the Best Practice for Starting a Project?

First, we abandon the order-taking, long lists of requirements and starting work quickly. Instead, we ask enough questions and learn enough about the executive's business to help them define what they want. It's the norm that executives know some of the things they want the project team to do. But usually they have not defined the desired operational result they want the project to deliver in measureable terms. And, they don't often welcome help in doing so.

Executives who are unaccustomed to project managers asking questions resent it and react negatively. But a savvy project manager responds to these objections with a reasonable statement like, "How can I deliver the business end result you want on time if I don't know what it is?"

Executives may not like that push back but it is worth a bit of early executive dissatisfaction if it gives the PM the opportunity to define a measured business result for the project scope rather than a list of requirements that grows endlessly. Let's go back and see how to do this correctly.

Back to the Start and the Way it Should Work

The executive stops at the drive-up window and says, "I want a project that finishes by the end of March."

The project manager answers, "Exactly what result are you looking for?"

A flash of anger washes across the executive's face, "Just get started. I want a project and I'm also in a hurry. When are you going to start work?"

The project manager says, "We'll start immediately after I understand the results you're looking for. What's the result you want from the project?"

"I need better efficiency."

The PM says, "I understand. How much improvement?"

The executive frowns in anger again, "Why are you asking all these questions instead of starting work?"

The PM politely responds, "Because it's unlikely that you'll be pleased with our work if we don't help you achieve your objectives. So what amount of efficiency improvement do you need?"

"Enough to cut costs by 12% from the customer service department. We need training, new systems, new cubicles," the executive says.

"Well, if you want to have a 12% cost reduction we need systems and training that lets your customer service people handle 12% more customer calls."

The executive smiled, "Then we could gradually let attrition reduce the staff. Now let's get into the details..."

The project manager has accomplished a couple of things. First, the project manager has avoided taking on a project that was almost certain to fail. Second, the project manager has created the potential for moving from order-taker to a strategic partnership with the executive.

Summary

In sum, a strategic approach on the front end of projects produces benefits not only in the project itself but also in the portfolio of projects. You may wish to explore these ideas in our **in-person classes** for companies or our **Individual Web Classes**.