

## The Impudent Project Manager: Act One - The Project Planning Session



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**We have some fun with the Saga of the Project from Hell and our superhero (ine) Chris Pimbock.**

Let's look in as Chris Pimbock, the impudent project manager, faces a daunting project management challenge that may well blemish a sterling career. Yes, the impudent project manager must work for the project executive from hell, a client/user/sponsor who has dashed more project management careers than scope creep. Is Chris up to the challenge? Or will we need to change our hero(ine)'s name to impotent project manager?

Chris Pimbock studied the project executive across the glistening mahogany desktop but saw no sign of evil. Well dressed, with a tanned face and a pleasant, almost innocent expression, the executive's appearance gave no sign of the project deathtrap that Chris now saw emerging from the mists. The impudent project manager flicked an almost imaginary particle of dust from the sleeve of an elegant pinstriped business suit and said, "Yes, I certainly have notes on all the elements we have discussed." Chris ran a manicured finger down the long, laundry list of activities and recited, "I've noted the following:

- ❑ employee suggestion box
- ❑ the new web site with really colorful graphics and Java scripts
- ❑ the employee satisfaction survey
- ❑ the need to reduce the number of screens our customer service representatives have to utilize
- ❑ your requirement for 4 different employee training classes
- ❑ the need for faster turnaround time on billing corrections
- ❑ and, of course, the requirement to be Y2K and Y3K compliant."

"I can certainly draft the Gantt chart to address these needs and I definitely heard you when you said the Gantt chart needs to be at least 2,650 lines long so that we have tight control."



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The project executive nodded approval of the impudent project manager's words and said, "This project will be a major step toward world-class customer service and it's my top priority. Now, we absolutely, positively have to be done by October 30th at the very latest."

Chris froze, perfectly motionless, allowing no facial expression beyond a slight raising of the eyebrows. Then, very carefully, Chris said, "As you know, I take my commitments very seriously. I'll have to calculate the amount of work that needs to be done and the resources that are available to do it before you and I can review the data on work and resources and calculate when this project will finish. Then I can make a commitment."

## The Sponsor from Hell

With flared nostrils, the executive from hell stressed, at great length, the importance of the October 30th date, saying the date louder and louder. The impudent project manager thought, 'Do I look like some kind of rookie, some panting puppy, fresh from my first Gantt chart? Does this executive really think I will commit to a completion date during our first planning discussion? If I even tentatively agree to a completion date now, it will be carved into the granite edifice of this building by morning, and any later suggestion that the date is not attainable will be high treason.'

The executive continued to extol the vital necessity of the October 30th date, creating the impression that all life on earth, as well as Chris' career, would end if the date was not met. The impudent project manager sat as if cast from stone, knowing that even the slightest nod or facial tick would be taken as a rock solid commitment to the completion date.

Meanwhile the impudent project manager thought, 'This devil wants me to start work with absolutely no idea about the specific problems to solve or the business needs to meet. The project is going to be a consummate disaster because all we are doing is throwing trendy business darts at an imaginary target while wearing a blindfold. Worse, every time this executive hears a trendy idea from some drunk on an airplane or peruses a business article, I'll get a few more items to add to this pig of a project. At the end, this devil will take none of the blame and look at me and say, "You spent all that money and we have not accomplished a damn thing." No wonder this executive from hell has killed off so many project managers.'

The impudent project manager thought through the options. One unacceptable alternative was to start work and let this project blemish an otherwise spotless project management success record. Then a genius stroke flashed into Chris' mind! It's time for Sleazy Project Management Technique No. 37. It's a sickening, humiliating tactic but old #37 would save the day!

The impudent project manager waited for a pause in the executive's ranting about the due date and said, "Before I leave to get started on this big Gantt chart, I'd really appreciate it if you'd share with me your strategic vision. You have such a fantastic grasp of long term strategy that it would really help me if you tell me what the future will look like when this project's done."

The impudent project manager settled more comfortably into the leather chair, knowing that there would be a lot of words to listen to over the next half an hour. As the executive rambled on about the glories of the future, the impudent project manager listened for some semblance of a measurable strategic outcome for the project. Without that, this project would choke on its mushy scope and gorge on new activities and trendy ideas.

Having long ago mastered the art of sleeping with eyes open and head nodding, the impudent project manager got a bit of a nap. The rest period was interrupted when Chris' subconscious recorded the phrase, "...and our customers won't have to talk to four different people before they get their problem solved." The impudent project manager bounded out of the coma like a panther and said, "What percentage of customers must now speak to several of your employees before their problem gets resolved?"

## A Little Business Value

The executive didn't know but with some prodding made three phone calls and then said, "It appears that about 40 percent of our customers have to be transferred before they get to the person who can solve their problem."

The impudent project manager thought for a moment and then said, "We might want to consider measuring the success of this project in terms of lowering that 40 percent transfer rate."

The executive frowned suspiciously and snapped, "That sounds too simple, there are so many things we have to do."

The impudent project manager nodded and said, "Actually, having a simple and measurable business result as our project objective is the best way to achieve business relevant outcomes. In fact, I've even read a book about setting measures of success (MOS™) for projects and then building a "blueprint" of High-level Achievements (HLA™). This achievement structure will help us keep things on track as well as setting the stage for a project where everyone knows what's expected from them before they start work. Let's talk a little bit more. If 40 percent of the callers have to be transferred, then it seems that 60 percent of the customers have their problem resolved by the first person to whom they speak. You used the phrase "world-class customer service" a moment ago. How high does this "one-stop service" percentage have to be to give your customers world-class customer service?"

The executive says, "Well, 100 percent would be fabulous."

Chris smiled and responded, "It certainly would be fabulous but it might take us a very long time to get there. Of course, I'll give you the data to decide on the trade-offs between various levels of achievement, cost, risk and duration. But at 100%, we'd have to solve every single thing that causes one of your employees to transfer a customer to another employee. Solving all those problems would take a very long time. We might do better to aim for a significant improvement, say 80 percent of the customers' problems are solved by the first person they speak to. That way, we can address only the most significant causes of transfers and finish the project much

sooner. Why don't I draft a strategic plan based on this 80 percent one-stop service and you can decide what level of achievement you want and what duration is best."

A sneer flashed over the executive's face for a nano-second and then faded, "Well I still want a very detailed project plan with an October 30<sup>th</sup> finish and don't forget all those action items I gave you!"

The impudent project manager smiled, "Why don't we confine our initial planning to strategic results and the measured achievements that will take us from where we are now to the Measure of Success we're discussing. That way you can control the strategy of the project at a high-level and then I can calculate the work and resource requirements, once you approve the strategy. Then we can also talk about my authority on this project because it seems that we'll be borrowing people from several organizations."

The executive grunted suspicious agreement. Chris made a last note and then glanced up from the pad in time to see a flash of hell-fire in the executive's eyes that faded as soon as it appeared.

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We'll rejoin the impudent project manager and this project in a later issue of PMtalk newsletter. Meanwhile to learn more about cross-functional project planning techniques and enterprise project management, visit <http://www.4pm.com> and look through the free project repository of tools, articles and techniques, our project management textbooks, and our in-person and Web/CD training courses.