

## Framing Projects with Measurable Business Outcomes



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**Framing a project with measured achievements gives sponsors and PMs control over the features that will be included and, as importantly, those that will not.**

### Project Management Artist

For a project manager, framing the project is a difficult task. Stakeholders want to talk about features, functionalities and fixtures not the business value they will deliver with them. Framing is also hard when executives talk about "getting started quickly" and finishing "as soon as possible," figuring that we can frame the project as we go.

So how does a project management artist cope with the framing process? Well, there are a number of techniques that don't work. The first "sure to fail" tactic is to write long, rambling project scope statements that are so vague that no one disagrees with anything. This makes the stakeholders very happy with the project manager...in the beginning.

The second "sure to fail" tactic is to focus on features, fixtures and activities which delights the micromanagers in the stakeholder group as well as those who want to avoid conflict and difficult decisions. This last group can be easily identified because they're the ones who talk only about getting off to a fast start.

We've talked about what doesn't work, now let's talk about the techniques that let us frame the project. We need to get all of the project patrons to look at the business situation through the same frame and then agree on the dimensions of that framing of the project's business value.

### Short, Direct & Measured; Broad-Brush Plan

Long windy narratives don't give us the kind of framing we need because people don't read them and the frame has no hard edges. These literary masterpieces define the scope with such "political correctness" that everybody can see something in it that they like. But what works best is a short, 1-1 1/2page, broad-brush strategic plan that frames measurable and verifiable business outcomes and the value of the project. We can always write a more massive plan once the strategic framing is approved.



**PM Certifications**

[IT Systems](#)  
[Construction](#)  
[Marketing](#)  
[Healthcare](#)  
[PMP](#)

**Your PM Career**

[Get into PM](#)  
[Expand Skills](#)  
[Get Certified](#)  
[Program Mgt](#)



We resist talking to project executives about the artistic, technical details of the paints and colors we'll use. Instead we do the very difficult thinking required to frame the project in terms of measurable business results. Few project patrons are interested in the technical details of mixing colors or formulating features. Project managers who talk to patrons at this level should not be surprised when they have difficulty getting executives to spend time with them. Regardless of how fascinating we may find the technical details, most project patrons are not interested in how the artist will mix colors to create a tantalizing sea-green background. They could care less about how that sea green will bring out of the tan the palm tree trunk. They want to know what people will pay for the painting and how many we can sell.

That's why we do the very difficult intellectual chore of probing the business scene and quantifying the outcomes and the business value; what the patron wants to "buy" for the project. Then we express that business value in their language, not ours.

## **Spraying Gasoline on the Smoldering Embers**

Good strategic project framing doesn't create conflict. But if burning embers of conflict exist in the business situation or between the patrons, good framing sprays gasoline on those embers to ignite them. Why inflame the conflict? Because we'd much rather bring it out into the open before we start work than have the flames spring to life when we're half done. We're not talking about the project manager having conflict with the patrons. That would be a stupid, career-limiting move; these people are, after all, our clients or organizational superiors. No, we're talking about inflaming the conflict between the patrons and then facilitating its resolution before we start work.

So how do we inflame this conflict? By being absolutely crystal-clear about what the project will produce and, as importantly, what it will not. We do this with short scope statements that are unambiguous and measurable business outcomes. That's the gasoline and we spray it on the fires of conflict by distributing it to everyone in a very short, annoyingly direct and eminently readable form. We want them to agree on how they will measure success when we are done.

## **Sub-Framing From the Top Down**

Once we have an agreement and signoff on the measured business outcome that the project will deliver, the Measure of success (MOS™), we continue the framing effort by developing a network of supporting sub-achievements that will lead us from the present business situation to the MOS™. Once again, we're spraying gasoline on any conflicts that might exist by being very specific, quantifiable, and measurable in describing the supporting business achievements, or path, that will lead us to the end result. This path to the MOS™ includes more than just our work; it also frames the process changes and achievements others must deliver. Someone did, after all, have to hang the Mona Lisa and direct viewers to it.

The difficulty in this process is avoiding the "activity trap." Everyone, including the project manager, finds it a lot easier to talk about what we're going to do than to enumerate what we're going to achieve. But when we lay out the "backbone" of our

project in measured achievement terms, we not only frame the project very specifically for our patrons but also give ourselves a foundation for crystal clear assignments to our project team members. We can communicate to the team exactly what end results we expect from them before they start work so they don't wander around with their brushes wondering where to paint.

Once we have secured signoff on this one page network of measured business outcomes, we're ready to develop the "4-Corners" of our project plan and give ourselves the best scope and change control tool available; the ability to quantify trade-offs between the dimensions of the project.

## "4-Corners Trade-Offs™" Management of the Project

Every project has "4-Corners" and changes in one corner always impact at least one other corner:

- ❑ Business value (MOS™)
- ❑ Budget
- ❑ Completion date (duration)
- ❑ Risk (or level of confidence) in delivering the preceding three corners.

Unfortunately, in most projects only one, or at most two, of these "corners" is explicitly measurable. The completion date is always objectively measurable and rock solid. But most internal projects have no other measurable dimension. In some business situations, the budget for the project will also be measurable. But even with these two measured dimensions, the business value of the project is usually unmeasurable mush. As a result, we can't quantify the impact of scope changes on the budget or duration except by whining loudly or cutting off one of our ears.

The risk corner is rarely measured. As a result, project patrons assume that there's no risk and that we are 100 percent confident of delivering the business value within the duration and/or budget. Now, 100 percent confidence seems ridiculous, particularly in light of the fact that most organizations experience a project failure rate near 50 percent. Yet few project managers give their patrons the opportunity to make decisions about the level of confidence they want and the level of "risk insurance" they want to buy.

However, if the framing process we've been talking about gives us a quantified measure of the project's business value and if we build our project schedule and budget competently, we can present our patrons with quantified trade-offs between the "4-Corners" of the project plan. This data-based decision-making and "fine-tuning" is a far better platform for approval than one based on arbitrary changes to one or more of the corners without any compensating changes in the others.

As well, we utilize these quantified trade-offs every time we have a variance to the plan. Thus our status reports include trade-off analyses between the "4-Corners™", which allow executives to evaluate alternatives for taking advantage of opportunities and recovering from problems.

[www.4PM.com](http://www.4PM.com) Project Management Training and Certification

©2006 The Hampton Group, Inc. 5031 South Ulster Suite 240 Denver Colorado 80237 303-756-4247  
May not be reproduced in any form without written permission

## Summary

If you're interested in our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology](#) visit [www.4pm.com](http://www.4pm.com). To learn the specific techniques for framing your projects and for developing "4-Corners<sup>TM</sup>" trade-offs, look at our project management bookstore or consider taking one of our project management training classes, either in-person or with our instructor-lead web courses. There are also numerous free articles on these topics in our Project Management Library.