

## Blind Date Projects



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Projects that are planned solely with due dates and no thought for work or deliverables usually finish late and leave months of clean up work at the end.

### Getting asked out on a blind date

Ever had a blind date that was so bad you wore a brown bag over your head so no one would recognize you?

Well, projects planned solely with due dates are like a really bad blind date. They start like this:

The client or project sponsor describes the project then pauses and thinks: "These damn projects never finish on time and project managers' schedule promises aren't worth a penny. I don't really need this until September 1 but I better give myself some slack and ask for it a lot earlier."

Then the client or sponsor pounds a fist on the desk and says to the PM, "Now this is a top priority project that has to be done by May 30." The project manager, panting like a happy puppy, gives the "thumbs up" sign and scurries back to his or her cubicle to start laying out the project plan, thinking "Well, to be finished by May 30th, Rick has to be finished by May 15, Ramon has to be finished with his work by May 1, Helen must be done by April 7..." and so on.

Then the PM informs the project team members of their due dates and gets shrugs and a few pained looks. The project team has been on this kind of blind date before. The PM then launches into the "participative management" process where each team member commits to a due date and if their date doesn't fit with the required completion date, a date that does is rammed down their throats. The dates to which the project team is now "committed" have been conjured from thin air. The only "data" used to set these dates came from the client's or sponsor's completion date.

### What the project team sees

The project team members know that neither their assignments nor the project as a whole will be finished on time. And they know who will be



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blamed for this failure. But they have also learned that complaining about due dates is viewed as a lack of team spirit. What the sponsor or client doesn't know is that even if the project is done by the due date it is likely to be such a stinking mess that re-work and fixes will take the project far past the September date that he wanted in the first place. The project manager doesn't believe the dates any more than the project team but knows that any complaints will be viewed as whining. What a wonderful foundation from which to launch the project. This story is the project management equivalent of having a friend set up a blind date, describing he/she/it as having, "a wonderful personality." Only a nincompoop anticipates that the blind date or this project will turn out well.

## Then work starts

Work starts on the project. Rick is supposed to be finished with his task by May 15. He's also on four other projects that are No. 1 priorities. And, Rick's real boss may pull him off project work so he can do his "real job." In this situation, does Rick feel accountable for hitting the May 15 date? Not at all. When will the PM find out if Rick is going to be late? Probably on the 15th of May. Can the project manager do anything about the slippage at that point? No. Even if the PM had used Rick's estimated completion date in the project plan, this PM will still be vulnerable to learning about problems after it is too late to do anything about them because there is no way to objectively measure progress. So the project proceeds and when we get a month from the due date everyone decides what they can really get done by the completion date. No wonder these projects are always a mess.

## The solution

The solution to this problem begins with that first discussion with the client or sponsor. When the May 30th date is mentioned, the PM says something like, "I understand what you want, now let me lay out the work that has to be done and the resources I need to do it. Only after doing that can I give you a commitment that is worth something." Then the PM works with the project team to develop estimates of the hours of work required for each assignment. The first draft of due dates comes from calculating the durations from the amount of work that has to be done and the availability of people to do it. This requires a great deal more work from the project manager than plucking dates out of the air. The PM has to sit down with the project team members and make it clear what has to be done and then discuss the number of hours of work that it will take. This is what's called making a good assignment. The project manager makes it clear exactly what is wanted, by assigning a measurable achievement (this is our AdPM methodology1).

Then the project manager secures the availability of the people to do this work, usually from their bosses. The schedule is now built from data for each assignment like: Rick is available halftime and has to do 80 hours of work so the duration of the assignment is four weeks.

The project manager who plans this way is in a better position to work with the sponsor or client on the planned completion data. Now the PM has data in the form of

hours worth of work that have to be done and data about the availability of people to do the project work. This doesn't mean we can "fight" with the client. It means we can show them data and calculations about when we can finish and let them make decisions about trade-offs if they want an earlier date. The trade-offs would take the form of: "We have 300 hours worth of work to complete this critical path assignment and two people to do it, so it will take a month. If we assign four people to this work we can complete it in two weeks and thus reduce the duration of the project. Or, we can reduce the work from 300 hours to 150 hours by achieving less (e.g. survey 300 customers instead of 600) and cut two weeks that way. Which option do you want?" You may be thinking, "My client or sponsor won't look at the data and won't make decisions about the trade-offs, they just shout the due date louder." Well, the project will probably be unsuccessful but this kind of executive is used to that. While there are executives who won't use the data or make tradeoff decisions, they are the exception. Most executives welcome the opportunity to see the data and to make strategic decisions on the trade-offs between what a project will achieve, what it will cost and how long it will take. In fact, so few executives get the chance to do this that you may really surprise your boss or client when you offer it.

It is up to project managers to plan projects in ways that give their clients/sponsors the data to make these decisions. When you give them no option, you reap the consequences of managing one blind date project after another. Now as the project progresses, the PM is not blind to what's happening until it's too late.

When the project manager finds out during the first week of the assignment that Rick has only completed five hours of work as opposed to the 20 that was planned, it's not too late to do something about it. Project managers who plan projects in this manner can solve small problems early rather than face big problems when it's too late. As mentioned earlier, this achievement-driven process takes more work on the part of the project manager during the planning phase. We also alter the way we develop our work breakdown structure; it's not an endless list of micro-activities, it's a much shorter list of the measured achievements we want to track and manage. However, if we plan the project with measured achievements (as in our AdPM™ methodology) then the project plan will have one-tenth the number of lines, making work estimating much less daunting.

To learn more about these techniques, read about our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology](#) or take one our 1-on-1 training courses.