

Project Team: Moments of Truth and the Elephant



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Summary: You determine much of your project team's performance by how you handle three moments of truth (MOT): how you make assignments, how you handle the project sponsor's demands, and how you handle bad news

Some project managers lead triumphal marches at the head of their project teams. Other PMs are like that poor sap at the circus who marches behind the elephant carrying a snow shovel. The difference is in how these PMs handle three Moments of Truth (MOT) with their project teams.

When handled with the processes in our [AdPM™ project methodology](#), these MOTs produce team members who actually finish some assignments early and actually take responsibility for solving problems and figuring out better, faster ways of completing their assignments. When we are ineffective in handling the three MOTs, we have a team with little incentive to do anything but avoid personal blame.



MOT #1 "Oh Sure, We're Committed"

The first MOT comes early, during the project planning phase. We're building a plan and schedule which we will take to the sponsor and upon which we will base our completion date and budget commitments. There usually is pressure from the sponsor to hit a completion date we already know is unlikely or even impossible. We don't want to upset the sponsor with information about the impossibility of their desired date. On the other hand we want to gain the team members' commitment to their schedule and so it must be realistic. That is the dilemma of the first Moment of Truth.

The temptation at this point is to back into the schedule. That is, start from the sponsor's desired completion date and work backward, laying in completion dates as we go; "Jack has to be finished by November 23 so Mary has to be finished by November 5th and Pearl has to be done

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by October 19th.” Often we find that we should have started three months ago. Not a problem, we just revise the dates until they fit the sponsor’s completion date. Then we go tell the team when their assignments have to be finished. If they protest we either blame the sponsor directly or shrug and point to the executive floor. This way the project schedule (on paper) finishes precisely on the date the sponsor wants and that makes the executive happy with you, at least for a while. And you may be whispering to yourself, “We’re smart and hard working, maybe we can finish by then.” This technique is widely used and in some organizations plucking dates backwards is a “Best PM Practice.” Of course these organizations also have 70% failure rates on projects. More to the point, the backwards date plucking makes the PM fail at Moment of Truth #1.

Our project team feels backward plucked themselves. The younger and more innocent members of the team are discouraged, knowing that they will fail to finish on time. The more experienced team members also know they’ll finish late but their experience tells them to get ready to spend months after the project’s “finish” date cleaning up the mess they frantically slapped together in the vain attempt to finish “on-time.”

What kind of commitment do we get from our team from this kind of process? People who know they have no chance of reaching their “committed to” results have the same dedication and enthusiasm as the circus spectators we invite to be shot from the cannon. How do we succeed at MOT #1? We engage the team in work and duration estimating on assignments where the PM has made the end result of their assignment crystal clear and objectively measurable. We negotiate the duration or work estimate associated with each of their measured achievements. We’re taking the risk of actually trusting our project team. Some will take advantage of us and pad the estimates. But it’s far better to finish MOT #1 with 80% of the team feeling that their assignments are fair and freely negotiated and 20% slinking under the grandstands knowing they’ve bamboozled the PM.

The resulting first draft schedule has never in the history of project management met the boss/client/user’s mandated completion date. So we apply every ounce of creativity the team can muster to squeeze the plan and develop shortcuts and innovations that slash the duration. Unfortunately, 99.9% of the time these efforts will still fall short of the sponsor’s completion date expectation. This leads us to MOT #2.

MOT #2, “Do You Want the Bad News Now or Later?”

We’ve got three choices. First, we go meet with the executive and ask a tiny little question about completion date flexibility and get a negative answer. Then with a big, toothy clown’s grin, we assure the executive that we’ll deliver on the date the sponsor wants. We go back to the team, tell them what a jackass the executive is and commiserate with them on our upcoming fall from the tightrope.

The middle road is to meet with the involved executive and ask/plead/beg/whine/argue for more time and people. When we don’t get them, we return to the project team and tell them that we gave it our best shot and that the executive is a jerk.

Third, we can invest the time to develop quantified data about all "4-corners" of the project plan - measured business value (MOS™), budget, duration and risk (see our AdPM methodology). Rather than argue with the sponsor, we show them data on the trade-offs between these four measurable dimensions of our project. From the base of the schedule that we developed with our team, we show them calculated trade-offs for:

- ❑ Finishing earlier by achieving less business value
- ❑ Finishing earlier by increasing the budget
- ❑ Finishing earlier by adding resources on critical path tasks.

When we take the time to quantify all "4-corners" we give executives the chance to make strategic decisions based on data. We model all the relevant trade-offs in our PM software so we don't have to fight or beg (neither works anyway). The executives can manipulate the 4-corners trade-offs until they see a combination they like. This lets them exercise real strategic control and lessens the tyranny of dates. It also increases the likelihood of a project yielding a satisfied user or client.

What we're hoping for is to emerge from the approval process with a probability of at least 70% for delivering the business value within the duration and budget. We can certainly start work with a lower probability. However, once we start quantifying all the dimensions, sponsors learn that no project has a 100% percent probability of success. Then they start juggling the four dimensions to meet their needs.

When we succeed at this second MOT, we emerge from the approval process with both the feasibility of our plan and the commitments from our project team intact. When we fail at MOT #2, we undo MOT #1.

MOT #3, "I Won't Even Listen To Bad News!"

At an early meeting of the project team, one of the members says to you, "I've got slippage on my assignment!" Visions of the whole project collapsing flash through your mind. We've come to MOT #3 and there are choices here too.

This bad news may tie your stomach into knots because the slipping task is on the critical path and thus pushes the project completion date out. It's very easy to greet this bad news as a personal betrayal by that project team member and as something for which they are to be blamed. There are PMs who think this refusal to listen to bad news is a sign that they are dynamic and aggressive leaders. The truth is just the opposite. When PMs behave like this they teach the person with the slipping task, and every other team member, not to give them bad news. From then on, the team will use a lot more optimism when reporting the status of their assignments. That dynamic PM who won't listen to bad news dooms him or herself to always trying to solve big problems when it's too late. That is really marching behind the elephant with only a hankie to clean things up.

Hard as it is to do, we need to handle bad news with appreciation. The team member with a variance is often not to blame and even if they are the culprit, we don't let on that we have reached that conclusion. We handle the variance as a problem we have

to jointly solve. We want the team member to continue to trust us. Then we get the exceedingly valuable opportunity to solve a small problem early. If we discourage our team members from giving us bad news, we doom ourselves to discovering problems when it's too late to recover.

Even if we manage to handle the bad news properly, we may still fall prey to micromanaging when problems emerge. We want to "make things happen, now!" So what do we do? We stick our fingers into everyone's assignments. We may have built a commitment foundation where the team feels accountable for their achievements. But as soon as we start checking their work every day, we wash away that foundation.

It is enormously difficult to keep our hands off people's assignments when the sponsor is putting a great deal of pressure on us about missed deadlines and budget overruns. But that is exactly the moment at which we need the benefits of a project team that feels accountable for their achievements and has some incentive to meet and, hopefully, exceed their assignments. Whatever trust and commitment we've built so far goes away when we don't honor our part of the "contract" about what they are accountable for delivering and how we'll measure their performance.

Summary

When we succeed in each of these three Moments of Truth, we substantially increase the likelihood of project success. Each of the MOTs involves both personal leadership techniques and sound project management processes. Learn these processes and our [AdPMTM project methodology](#) in our 1-on-1 distance learning classes where you'll interact with sponsors and team members in role-playing exercises with your instructor. You'll also watch videos of PMs in action. Whenever you have a question you can telephone or e-mail your instructor and always get a response within 24 hours.