

The Five Dumbest Things A Project Manager Can Say



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Project managers are often their own worst enemies, sayings things that lead to disaster. Here are a few of the classics.

Initiating the project

A PM sits in a VP's office accompanied by a newly hired project manager, Chris Pimbok, who is shadowing the PM to learn the organization's way of doing projects. The PM smiles and listens to the VP explain his "World-class Performance Project" with smiles. It's a Priority #1 project. The PM's head is nodding like a bobble toy at everything the VP says.

The VP's a little vague when asked about scope and exactly what the organization wants from the project. Instead the VP talks about getting off to a fast start on the project because there's pressure from "up top." The VP explains that the PM's future is dependent on being action-oriented, flexible in making changes, and focusing on working not generating plans, analyses or other useless paperwork. With a sigh, the VP advises the PM that all the meetings should be postponed until after the project is done. The PM's head continues to bobble agreement.

Then the executive looks deeply into the PM's eyes and says he needs a personal commitment to start fast, plan as we go and finish by October 15th.

Chris Pimbok groaned inside and thought, "What's coming next is a really dumb commitment. This PM has been too passive, too agreeable and too eager to please. A little polite pushback right here, right now and the PM can stave off catastrophe by finding out what business outcome the VP expects and how success will be measured. Instead, the PM will say something really dumb.

The PM says, "Certainly! We can start today, plan as we go and be done by October 15th, maybe sooner."

Project Approval Presentation

So the team started work on the first few things the VP wanted while the PM worked like a sled dog writing an elegantly worded 134-page plan, scope statement and plan narrative. The PM was surprised at how tough it was to get planning time with the VP now that they'd started work. The PM kept getting emails from executives who referred to the project by different names like "World-class Customer Service," "Cost Containment" and "Quality is Our Middle Name." Hoping to avoid angry executives the PM incorporated all those ideas into the project plan presentation. Only a few executives attended the presentation and they discussed sales goals which made the PM wonder if sales growth should have been included in the scope. The PM presented 27 carefully worded assumptions and 81 key risk issues. At the end, there were no questions but four of the executives assured the PM of their full support as they walked out.

Sitting at the back of the room, Chris Pimbock knew what would happen over the next few weeks. This PM thought that project planning was a happy friendly process. It's not because a PM has to tell stakeholders exactly what the project will and, more importantly, what it will not include. This PM included everything anyone requested. Further, those lists of risks and assumptions were worthless because the PM did not get agreement to do something about them. Good planning should surface problems and conflicts so PMs can deal with them. If the plan is the usual mealy mouth "keep everyone happy" document scope control is impossible; leading PMs to say really dumb.

After the meeting the VP came up to the PM and asked how things went. The PM answered, "I documented all the risks and everyone loved the plan so we have clear sailing ahead."

Planning

The PM and Chris Pimbock heard the sponsor talk about tight control on 50 occasions during a morning's meeting. The PM dove into the work breakdown structure with a vengeance, listing all 3,567 conceivable steps for tight control. A grim Chris Pimbock said nothing.

Weeks later, the PM had the usual line of project team members waiting in a line stretching from the PM's cubicle. All had decisions for the PM to make or changes to their mini-tasks to approve. Most complained about having to report status on 47 tasks each week. Chris watched as the PM finally gave up trying to keep the schedule current; it just took too much time with all the decisions the PM had to make for the team.

Chris grimaced at the team member's attitudes knowing that the best practice is to hold people accountable for end results, not detailed To Do lists. Micromanagement is a killer on projects and leaves the PM as the only person who feels accountable for anything. Chris also knew that the PM was going to say something really dumb.

Talking to an associate, the PM complained bitterly about the team, "This team of losers comes to me with every little glitch they run into; I have to make all the decisions."

Estimating

The PM sat down with the fifth project team member, thoroughly irritated by the previous four discussions where team members complained that they didn't understand the assignments and had no idea what the PM really wanted. The fifth team member was no different. The PM asked the team member to estimate the assignment's duration. The team member suggested something between 6 and 10 weeks. The PM knew that the due date was already at risk and that another bloated estimate would make that date impossible.

Chris Pimbok knew what was coming, it was the inevitable result from what had happed before. The PM was boxed in with an impossible due date, an expanding scope and no option but to get really fantastic efforts from the project team. Only their dedication and commitment could carry the project to success. Chris knew that team member commitment was fragile and easily destroyed if a PM said something stupid to make the team feel that failure was certain. Chris was not optimistic.

The PM sneered at the team member and said, "That's ridiculous! Any experienced professional can get this assignment done in 3 weeks not 6 or 10. Your estimate is 3 weeks and you're committed to it."

Change Control

The PM pressed on and the line of team members waiting for decisions and direction was now occasional interrupted by a high ranking stakeholder. Each of them wanted to add to the project scope. Initially the PM agreed to add these changes as most were small and harmless and the trickle would soon end. Besides, the PM wanted to keep the stakeholders happy. Then, the PM begin to worry. The trickle turned into a flood of changes and the PM decided to put a stop to it.

The PM greeted the next executive politely, carefully listened to the change request and then explained the status of the project and the threat to the completion date.

Chris Pimbock listened with a sick feeling, knowing that a PM can't control project scope without a hard edged definition of what is in, and what is not in, the project. That's why they risk unhappiness in the planning to make the scope clear. If the project scope is unclear, it is impossible to say what is outside the scope an unnecessary. Then change requests become political battles which the project manager always loses. Chris waited for the PM to say the inevitable

The PM told the executive, "there will be no more changes to this project: the scope is frozen."

15 minutes later, the VP called and told the PM to stop making executives angry and to simply add the change.

Summary

As an alternative to seeking a lower stress job in the fast food industry, PMs can develop the skills and best practice techniques to handle these situations properly as we've talked about here. All these techniques are taught in our [individual training classes over the web](#) as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).