

Yes, You Can Negotiate Project Constraints!

By Alan S. Koch, PMP, CSM, Certified ITIL Expert

Introduction

"This is what we need. You can use these resources. And you must deliver it by that date."

Does this sound familiar? If so, you are not alone. Many project managers find themselves in just such a situation. There are lots of dictates, no flexibility, and more often than not, little realism in the demands.

What value is there in estimation when your sponsor has no interest in finding out what it will really take to do the project? The constraints have been chiseled in stone and we can't change them. End of story. Our job boils down to trying to keep the project from being too much of a disaster.

Although it may not seem to be true, we can negotiate unrealistic project expectations. And the key to being able to do this is to do a good job of estimating what it really will take to do the project.

No One Wants A Failed Project

The first step to negotiating project constraints is to realize that your project sponsor does not want your project to fail. (If your sponsor does want your project to fail, then it is time to get out!) Like everyone else with an interest in your project, your sponsor wants success, and may need it more than you do!

Your sponsor has considered the costs and benefits of doing the project and concluded that there is a good business case for taking the project on. Of course, both the costs and the benefits are initial estimates, not final reality. Your sponsor doesn't know what the actual costs will be any more than you do. But the initial estimate is as close as he or she can get during the project initiation phase.

If your sponsor thought the project was doomed to failure, he or she would not have gone forward with it. Failure is not the objective, success is! And your sponsor is counting on success.

Having received your mandate, your first job is to figure out how to make it succeed.

Discovering What It Will Take

Most of us believe that the purpose of estimating and planning is to answer the question, “What will it take?” When we are not asked that question, it might seem that estimation and planning are a waste of time. But nothing can be further from the case. In fact, in the face of project mandates, careful estimation and full planning are our most potent tools!

Our first step toward being able to negotiate unrealistic project constraints is to fill in the knowledge gaps. We can discover the cost and schedule information that was not available to our sponsor when the project was initiated. This information is a gold mine, because it can allow our sponsor to replace his or her initial rough estimates with much more concrete and specific ideas about the nature of the project and what it will take to achieve success.

There are many good estimation and planning methodologies, so we will not detail them here. In brief, we must do these sorts of things:

- Identify a reference project – one that we did in the past that has as much similarity to the new project as possible.
- List all of the activities that will have to happen on this new project – using the reference project as a pattern. Try to be sure that the activities you missed in planning the reference project don’t get missed this time!
- Estimate the effort that each of the project activities will take – again, using the reference project as a pattern. Even if you don’t have good historical data, you can come up with reasonable approximations based on who did what when on the reference project.
- Spread that effort over time based on the availability of people and other resources – Don’t forget that people cannot work 40 productive hours each week because of overhead and interruptions. Many experts recommend planning for only 20 hours of productive work per week per full-time person.
- Consider any special complexities or challenges in this new project and adjust your estimates accordingly

If you find that the cost and schedule you come up with are in line with the initial project constraints, then you can probably manage the project to a successful conclusion. Go for it!

So, now what?

Once you complete your time and cost estimates, if they are not in line with the initial project constraints, then there is bad news and there is good news. The bad news is that you must go back to your sponsor to renegotiate the project constraints. The good news is that you have the information that you and your sponsor need to figure out how to make the project successful!

Negotiating

The question about whether the project can succeed given the initial constraints is no longer a matter of your opinion versus your sponsor's opinion. You are now coming to the table with the best available data. After your sponsor gains confidence in your data, renegotiating the project will simply be a matter of adjusting the project scope, schedule target and/or budgetary constraints in order to make the puzzle pieces fit.

For most of us, the hard part will be to sell our data to our sponsor. Too many of us have a history of challenged projects that undermines our credibility in the sponsor's eyes. We must focus on the facts as presented by history.

- “Why do you have to do all of these things?” can be answered with, “We learned on projects X, Y and Z that if we skip these steps, these bad things happen...”
- “That shouldn’t take that long!” can be answered with, “That’s how long it took on projects A, B and C.”
- “Can’t we cut this corner?” can be answered with, “We cut that corner on project Q, and this was the result...”
- “Why should I believe you this time?” can be answered with, “This time, I am using history as my guide instead of my best guess or the initial rough estimates.”

The key is to avoid discussing opinion, focusing instead on historical fact. And don’t expect that this project will progress any differently than your reference project (unless you do things differently this time, that is).

Conclusion

After you have brought the facts to the table, it is your sponsor’s job to decide what to do with them. He or she has several options, including dropping the project, adjusting the project scope or constraints, or demanding a “death-march.” In the end, such decisions are your sponsor’s to make. By bringing real data to the table, you have done your part. And you have increased the odds of project success immeasurably by doing so.

What can you do to re-negotiate an unrealistic project with a strong sponsor or customer?

About the Author

Alan S. Koch, PMP, CSM, Certified ITIL Expert, is a speaker, consultant and author of Agile Software Development: Evaluating the Methods for your Organization. His clients benefit from his 35+ years of experience, education, training and his affiliation with leading organizations such as PMI, SEI, IIBA, IEEE and IT Service Management Forum. He has been recognized for his IT Service Management, project management and public speaking skills. IEEE awarded him its coveted Senior Member status "in recognition of significant contributions to the industry."

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To date, we have trained over 40,000 people, including over 6,000 on the Project Management Professional (PMP®) certification exam preparation. We co-developed the innovative blended learning PMP® exam preparation program that earned PMI's Professional Development Product of the Year award in 2007. We are a PM Training Alliance® (PMTA) Certified Training Provider (CTP), and Project Management Institute® (PMI) Global Registered Education Provider (REP).

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