

The Five Dumbest Things A Project Manager Can Say:



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: Project managers are often their own worst enemies and say things to avoid conflict and make people happy that lead to disaster. Here are a few of the classics.

“I understand this is priority #1. Sure, we can start immediately, plan as we go and finish by October 1st.”

There we are, sitting in an executive's office. It actually has a window and walls with artwork rather than a poster, like the shabby hovel where we work. We're listening to executives who outrank us by a mile. They're confiding in us, trusting us, and telling us about the critical importance of this project. It's a little vague as to what the executives actually want, beyond a fast start on the project. But there's pressure from "up top" and the whole organization is counting on us to get going quickly. We don't want to upset the executives with awkward questions about scope.

Grizzled veterans PMs know that a little polite, pushback upfront avoids really angry executives at the end. PMs need to know what executives expect the project to yield for the business...what business value it will produce. They need to ask tough scope questions now to "frame" the project within an unambiguous, verifiable scope. They need to get executive commitment on how they will measure the project's success. Sure, everybody is much happier when the PM is an eager puppy ready to run off and do something ...anything to get started quickly. But projects launched without answers to those scope questions drift from one vague objective to another as the political winds change.

So the fatal words come out of our lips before intellect can stop them. The executives smile, tell us we're on the team and quickly usher us out of the office. We're off to a good start. The executives are pleased with our work so far. Anyway, we can make up for the lack of clarity with a really strong plan narrative and scope statement.

“Gee, everybody was really happy with the project plan, they approved it in 3 minutes.”



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So the team starts working on the first few tasks and we work like a sled dog to write an elegantly worded 34-page scope statement and plan narrative. It's a thing of beauty with 27 carefully worded assumptions and 51 key risk issues. Surprisingly, it was a little tough to get planning time with the executives now that we've started work. But the assistant supervisors to whom they delegated the planning really pitched in to help, even though they didn't understand the point of the project either. We also got a hint that the various executives had somewhat different ideas about the project. Some referred to it as the "World-class Customer Service Project," while others called it the "2001 Cost Containment Project" and still others used the acronym "QOMN" for "Quality is Our Middle Name." We built all these ideas into the narrative and it read like poetry. We distributed copies early so everyone could prepare in advance. Then we delivered the PowerPoint presentation to those few executives who could attend and it went great, they hardly asked any questions and the meeting ended in minutes. They liked it so much that few had even folded any of the pages over. Yes, the executives are still pleased with our work.

But battle-scared PMs know that developing and communicating a project scope has one purpose; telling people exactly what the project will and, as importantly, will not produce and what we need to produce it. Good scope statements don't make everyone happy; they bring to the surface conflicts between stakeholders and decision makers who have different views of the project. When we write the usual mealy-mouthed mush, everything is so vague that there is no conflict and none of the tough decisions get made before we start work. When do we resolve these conflicts? After we've done months of work, when the changes cost many times more than if we'd resolved them at the beginning.

After the scope approval, we go back to our cubicle and decide to make up for the slight lack of clarity in the project scope with a really detailed schedule and work breakdown structure.

"I've scheduled every detail. The plan weighs a ton!"

Recognizing that our front-end planning may have had a few flaws, we dive into the work breakdown structure with a vengeance. We list every little step that must be completed. This will calm the team down a bit. Some of them are a little upset over the lack of direction. A few contradictions have emerged as the detailed work continues to progress, but we're confident that everything will be rosy if we can just get all the details into the WBS. When the executives see this detail, they'll realize that the project is indeed being tightly controlled.

Savvy project managers learn to manage people's end results, not detailed To Do lists. Micromanagement is a killer on small projects and self-defeating on larger ones. Instead, the veterans craft the "right size" assignment for each individual based on their capability and make the expected end result crystal clear. Then they track progress against the end result and budget. "But they may forget to do something!" the micromanager frets with much wringing of hands. "That's true," the grizzled veteran answers, "Which is why it's so much better to make it clear that they are each responsible for their end results, not just the To Do list you give them."

But we ignore the advice and finish the monster plan. It is a bit disconcerting when the same executives who didn't read the project scope narrative don't examine the Gantt chart and schedule. Perhaps we did use a few too many acronyms and technical terms. The project team didn't derive any reassurance from the schedule. Instead, one team member after another parades into our cubicle with problems and decisions they want us to make. What's happened to people's initiative and willingness to tackle problems? This team of losers brings us every little glitch in the plan; like they're responsible for nothing. We do have a lot of technical expertise and we never let them go down the wrong path, thanks to the detail in the plan and all the checking we do, hopping from cubicle to cubicle to see how things are going. But there is something wrong with these people.

"No, you're wrong, that was never part of the scope! It's clearly a scope expansion!"

As we respond to a stakeholder or user with these words, we're filled with animosity at the outrageousness of their requests. It's as if they're stealing from the project as well as adding new things for the project to deliver that were never intended to be part of the effort. And when they escalate the changes to the executives, we get no support at all. The executives have even begun to use harsh words when we miss a date. It's like they think all these new things can be added without any impact on the budget or due date. And the team, which never developed much enthusiasm, is now getting worried as executive dissatisfaction trickles down hill.

Experienced PMs know that they almost never win when change control becomes a political battle, escalated to upper management. That's why they risk unhappiness in the beginning and spend so much time laying out a plan that allows them to quickly quantify trade-offs between the "4-corners™" of the project (scope, budget, duration and risk). Starting during the project approval meeting and each week thereafter, experienced PMs treat each change to any of the project's dimensions as a trade-off. Rather than fight, they present quantified data to the executives that shows the impact of the change and allows them to make informed decisions.

However, we don't have these tools or techniques so the project is bludgeoned with scope and date changes. That original due date, to which we so easily committed, is now only a dim memory. Team members are afraid to report overruns and we have to admit that our response to new problems is not as supportive as it should be. People are starting to hedge on their status reports, afraid to tell us about problems until it's too late to do anything about them.

However, we'll rally the troops for a final push to success!

"The due date is just two weeks away!
What can we get done in the time that's left?"

The funeral dirge for the project is playing in the background, as we ask the team to slap something, anything, together before the onrushing, but already twice postponed, due date. We've already cut testing, training and implementation time to

the bone. Whatever we do turnout will be a mess and will require months of rework and no one will be happy with anyone's work.

Grizzled PMs know that projects don't recover from this kind of mess because there are no miracle techniques that can put a train wreck like this back on the tracks. That's why they spend so much time building a solid foundation on the front-end. Of course, the grizzled veteran PM didn't know this in the beginning but this kind of project pain taught the veteran all these lessons.

"There are many low-stress, jobs in the fast food industry, why did I pick project management?"

Summary

As an alternative to working over the French fry vat, PMs can develop the skills and techniques to start projects off on the right track and keep them there. All the techniques in this article a part of our [Achievement-driven project Management](#) (AdPM™) methodology which we teach in [one-on-one courses](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).