Keep Your Project From Creeping Away

Delays and changes are a part of every project we do. Do we like them? Of course not. Do we have to learn to deal with them? Absolutely. Setting deadlines and scheduling are great ways to keep your project on track.

When setting a deadline, you should always base it on an analysis--not just a guess. You also need to factor in some amount of contingency time, or float time. It must follow the sequence logically. For example, you cannot complete step C before steps A and B. Your deadlines should also be realistic. As you're figuring your deadline, there are some ways that you can reduce the project delivery time. Using experienced team members, brainstorming ideas with front line workers, examining post mortems of other projects, gathering ideas from trade associations, and discuss options with industry experts are all ways in which to reduce completion time.

When figuring your deadline, you also need to figure your critical path. Critical path is the direction through which the project has dates which are considered unmovable. These dates are hard dates. If you miss these dates your project is late. Critical path dates normally use a great deal of resources. In considering the critical path, ask yourself the following questions:

- Which dates are unforgiving?
- Which dates have some sort of penalty if missed?
- Which dates are hard and must be completed to move the project forward?

Occasionally, your time calculations are wrong. This usually happens because:

No one calculated it at all--No one took the time to figure out how long the project was going to take.

Time was calculated based on one project not several--Oftentimes, we work on more than one project at a time. Not taking into account multiple projects going on at once will cause you to allocate time and resources when they are not available.

Time was shortened due to the project manager wanting to create stress--There are times when you just have a rotten project manager. These people do not care about the team members and will do things the way they want regardless of the sacrifices others will have to make.

Within your critical path you should set up milestones. Milestones are a groups of tasks which achieve a measurable movement in the project. They are checkup dates for monitoring a major completion. These dates give you a guideline so you can make sure your project stays on track.

When the project faces changes, you should have a plan in place to know how to handle them. You need to create a process for allowing change orders and

Accept the challenges, so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory.
George S. Patton (1885-1945)
U.S. General

The Mathis Group's
Messenger

communicate them to the entire team immediately. Document the changes, their new standard and who authorized it. Fill out documentation forms to justify your new changes.

If you do not follow the proper procedures for handling changes, it is called scope creep. Scope creep is changes not approved by the project sponsor. These changes are not communicated and are motivated by the project team. They are geared to reach goals of project team member, not the goals specified by the people in charge. When scope creep happens, it is usually because a team member *thinks* he or she knows what the project sponsor wants.

There are times when you have delays that can't be avoided. When this situation arises, there are ways to get the project back on track.

Create a fast start discussion meeting.
At this meeting, figure out a way to get the project started as soon as possible. Determine whether you need to bring on more team members, cut some of the project, or start the project before all resources are in place. Since you want to complete the project to the satisfaction of the project sponsor, keep in mind their expectations and needs.

Examine what is the least amount of the project which can be accomplished.
If you know that you will not be able to complete the entire project, establish the critical aspects. Prioritize the key elements and start there. Complete those elements, and, if times allows, come back to the areas that were cut and do them. Remember, you must gain approval from the project sponsor before you proceed.

Communicate the desire to speed the project up.
Sometimes simply communicating the urgency to speed up the project to the team members will be enough to get the job done. If everyone will hunker down and work harder, more will be accomplished. Also, by conveying the importance to speeding up the project, your team members may have suggestions on how to get this done faster and with more efficiency.

If your project is started late, more stress will be added to the team. All the float time will be used up immediately. The weight of decision making will also be increased. Pressure is placed on all decisions to be 100% correct. There will be no room for error; however, team members feel the need to speed up their decisions which sometimes increases miscalculations.

You can see how important it is to keep your project on time. If you have scope creep and add sections to the project that wasn't in the original plan and hasn't been approved by the project sponsor, you will waste your time, energy, and money.