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The Case for Quality When Cost and Schedule are King

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Everyone likes to take pride in their work. This includes project managers and project teams. Often this pride is diminished because the pressure to maintain schedule and cost results in sacrifices to quality.



Ironically, this frequently results in additional costs, extended schedule delays or “follow-on projects” to address the quality deficiencies. A focus on quality is common sense and better in the long term.

Despite this, it is a very common organizational problem to give up quality to meet schedule and cost targets. In today’s economic environment, cost pressure is tremendous. Once some leaders get in the mode of focusing on cost, it can become all they care about.

This attitude, instilled over a period of project cycles or years, becomes ingrained. **As a colleague recently remarked to me, “We did it again...on time...on budget...poor quality.”**



Ultimately, poor quality at project delivery has its roots in a lack of accountability for that aspect of the project. Project sponsors are regularly judged on easily quantifiable cost and schedule targets, while quality is just *assumed* to be delivered. This is amplified if there is a communication gap and/or weak accountability link between users or customers and the project sponsors.

The project manager can do several things to improve quality delivery for projects in environments where cost and schedule are king.

Identify the Key Players

To improve quality, it is imperative to identify who the project sponsors are and what is driving their behavior. What or who is causing the sponsor to be cost- and schedule-focused? How is the sponsor personally impacted by the poor quality of deliverables? Who are the users and customers?

The relationship between the user, customer and sponsor should also be understood and documented. How does or can the user of the project deliverable communicate quality issues to the sponsor? Sponsors are often at such a high level in the organization compared to users that there is no communication channel.

Collect Data

My definition of whining is complaining without data. Whenever quality does not meet the stated objective for any reason, the impact of this nonconformance needs to be documented.

At the end of a project, project managers often quickly focus on the next project. They may miss the opportunity to engage users or follow-up effectively to identify the costs of poor quality on previous project deliveries. This information is essential to building a strong case to create a future focus on quality.

Often organizational leaders will look at one project delivery that did not meet quality requirements as an anomaly or feel there were special circumstances for that project. But when you can present data for several projects or all projects over an extended time period, it strengthens the case that something needs to be done.

Exploit Opportunities

The project manager now has data on the cost of poor quality. He or she must make sponsors understand the impact and make the case for change.

The fact that this problem and culture exists in organizations indicates that it is at least in part political in nature. This means it is not enough to be right. It is not enough to have data. You must analyze the organization and the politics to identify when and how to bring your case forward.

There are circumstances and time frames when the organization may be more receptive. When this opportunity arises, you need to be ready to step in with the data showing the impact of the problem and also provide proposed solutions.

My experience has been that a good professional, persuasively written “position paper” that encapsulates the problem and solution is essential. The position paper should be written in the terms and context that are important to the key players. A presentation can accompany the position paper, but the position paper can be sent to the key players you identified that are essential to make the change.

On the surface, the problem of giving up quality to meet schedule and cost targets seems simple to fix—but it is not. Simple or quick fixes don't work and result in frustration. If you choose to be a champion of quality in a cost-focused environment, accept the fact that you will be running a marathon and not a sprint, and it will be a race you will have to run many times.

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