

Negotiating Schedule Changes with Sponsors

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By James T. Brown, PhD, PE, PMP

Change requests are inevitable in project management. Often the project sponsor may not grasp the ramifications of the change's impact, especially when that impact delays the project's scheduled completion date.

For a change that significantly affects the baseline, the project manager must negotiate a suitable end date with the project sponsor.

Three tactics can enable the project manager to be successful in negotiating a new project completion date with the sponsor:

Leverage your trust. The degree of trust you have with the sponsor goes a long way toward successful negotiation of a new schedule end date.

Creation of this trust starts once the project begins. If your trust level with the sponsor is low, expect a more challenging negotiation.

A battle-scarred project manager told me he has learned to accept as many funded change requests at the beginning of the project as possible without an impact to the schedule. He said most of these early changes tend to be easy and his initial schedule has some buffer to accommodate these.

The project manager's acceptance of these early changes without any schedule impact provides clear evidence to the sponsor that he or she is a willing partner and has "taken one for the team." If and when the late, difficult, or major change request arises, it becomes the sponsor's turn to help.

Communicate to assure understanding. Well before the project is baselined, the project manager needs to assure that the sponsor understands how the change management process works. Make sure the sponsor knows that it is in his or her best interest, and let the sponsor know to expect schedule impacts for changes that occur after the baseline.

Once the project is baselined, communicate the change's effect by clearly sharing the ramifications of the proposed change and identifying the constraints that drive the new proposed end date. Often sponsors are unaware of the challenges of trying to meet a certain date based on the change request, and this must be made clear to them.

A vice president of IT for a *Fortune* 100 company stated they have successfully used the "If you were building a house" analogy to get their sponsors to relate to the magnitude of proposed changes.

Sponsors can really feel the impact if they imagine they would not be able to move into their new home when they thought they would, or if their house might be unfinished at the original move-in date, so they see why a change might call for new schedule end dates.

Know the principles of successful negotiations. As a project manager, you should be skilled in the principles of negotiation. One of those principles is to make high initial demands. High initial demands enable you to have flexibility, and that facilitates successful outcomes.





The topic of this article was suggested by Musa A. Matemilola, M.Sc., PMP. Mr. Matemilola has been involved in the project management field for over 11 years and presently is a project manager with a Lagos, Nigeria-based engineering and contracting firm in the construction industry. [Submit a suggestion.](#)

High demands are not unreasonable, unrealistic or one-dimensional. They imply that you are prepared and have given thought to an assortment of alternatives that may help you and the sponsor come to agreement on a new date.

You as project manager will discuss these alternatives with the sponsor: Are there aspects or portions of the project that can be delayed? Can additional resources be provided? Can tolerances, specifications or constraints be relaxed?

Very few project sponsors are unreasonable. When you come across a sponsor being unreasonable, it is often due to a lack of understanding. Always ask yourself what you have done and can do to assure that the sponsor truly understands the circumstances. It is the project manager's role to create this understanding and gain sponsor acceptance of change impacts.



Dr. James T. Brown is president of a project management training company, [SEBA Solutions Inc.](#), and of a web-based provider of professional development units (PDUs) for PMI credential holders, [OnePdu.com](#). He is a keynote speaker on project management topics and will provide an address at the [PMI Information Systems SIG Professional Development Symposium \(PDS\) 10](#) in Seattle, Washington, USA, 27-30 June 2010. Please send your questions or comments to [Dr. Brown](#).

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