

Negotiating the Triple Constraints

By Alan Koch, PMP, Global Knowledge Course Director

We've heard it all before. The project sponsor announces, "Here's what I need. I need it by the first of the month, and it can't cost any more than this." The project sponsor dictates scope, cost, and time and tells us that nothing is negotiable. That is what and when we must deliver, and, "Oh, by the way, the quality must be good, too!"

The *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide)* teaches us that every project is governed by the "Triple Constraints" of scope, cost, and time, and that they must be balanced with each other to achieve project success. But our project sponsor either doesn't know about the Triple Constraints, or doesn't care. The mandate is decreed and we are stuck with it!

Or are we?

Why the Unreasonable Demands?

Does our sponsor want the project to fail? Of course not! So, why are we given such unreasonable demands? If you look at the situation from the sponsor's point of view, the demands start to make more sense.

Any manager in any organization (profit-making, non-profit, government, or whatever) is responsible for completing as much work as possible, as quickly as possible, and for the lowest cost possible. Managers who settle for anything less are shirking their fiduciary responsibility to the organization.

More often than not, the manager does not have a good way to estimate how much time and money a project should take. Even if this person has past experience with this sort of project, it is unlikely that he/she has the time to analyze it and consider all of its ramifications. When it comes to setting the constraints for the project, a manager who is serious about fiduciary responsibilities will push you hard, and then will push you just a little bit more.

The unreasonable demands stem from the project sponsor not knowing what the project will require, so he/she makes a best guess, then pushes beyond it to ensure that the project time and money are well spent.

What Can We Do About This?

Embarking on a project when we know it cannot be completed with the available resources is called a "Death March." If we simply march forward, we know that the project will fail, and we will suffer as a consequence.

But if we object, we are often told to stop whining and get back to work. We can tell the sponsor that we don't think the project can be completed with the given resources, but we are likely to be told that we can and we will! It is our opinion

versus that of the sponsor – and with the difference in position, our hands are tied.

While it is true that we do not have the authority to argue with management, we do have some tools that can help level the playing field: hard data and useful information. Our sponsor doesn't want to do the wrong thing, but probably lacks the information necessary to make the right decision. And we have that information!

We can level the field and prepare to have a meaningful negotiation with our project sponsor by following a simple three-step process:

1. **List the project activities.** Follow disciplined planning procedures to identify all of the steps that will impact project success. Be careful to think through all of the work that must happen using past projects as a guide to be sure you don't miss anything.
2. **Research past projects.** Understand the time and resources that those activities have normally required for success on past projects. (Or at least determine which resource levels were insufficient on past projects and use them to estimate what would have been needed.)
3. **Produce three solid defensible plans.** With the information from steps one and two, you can now produce three plans. Why three plans? The first plan will reflect exactly what the project (as defined by the sponsor) will actually cost in both time and money. The other two plans suggest alternatives that could come closer to meeting the constraints: perhaps one that has a smaller scope and meets the cost and schedule constraints, and another that meets the schedule and scope by increasing costs.

Armed with all of this information, we are prepared to actually negotiate with management!

The Negotiation

Most managers have had little experience with receiving well prepared and defensible plans, so you are likely to be met with a barrage of questions about your plans and the data on which they are based. Don't be discouraged by such a reception. It is management's responsibility not just to trust what they are told, but also to ensure that it is realistic and is based on real data. It may take some time to convince your sponsor that your plans and your data are based in reality, and, depending on how positive or negative your relationship has been in the past, it may take a project or two before your sponsor begins to believe you.

When your sponsor begins to believe in your data, you are finally in the position to negotiate project constraints that are workable and realistic. What the project ends up looking like is up to your sponsor. While your sponsor may make choices with which you disagree, as long as you provide the information necessary to make

good, rational decisions, you have done your part to ensure successful project planning.

About the author

Alan S. Koch, PMP, is a writer on effective Project Management methods and instructor for Global Knowledge. His 29 years in software development include over five years in Quality Assurance (including establishing & managing a QA department), and eight years in Software Process Improvement.

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