

Great expectations

Links to RICS/APM principles: Remember they're only human.

Stakeholder terms: Product breakdown, MoSCoW, key messages, chunking

Context

All sectors, minimal cost, about 2 hours total of the project manager's time. The initial phase of the project is where the scope of the project needs to be carefully explored, understood and the limits to scope agreed.

Problem

Whether it is concerning a business opportunity or a damaging issue, the agreement to a project's scope can become a battleground: "What precisely should the project deliver?"

Logic demands a long, hard look at the facts: Strategic fit, business benefits, costs, risks, resource availability, etc.

Human nature often intervenes however, with irrational behaviours quickly emerging, such as:

- Enthusiasm to realise the vision!
- The desire to be seen to act quickly. "Vital we make a decision, rather than no decision".
- Making wrongful assumptions in the absence of information.
- Ignoring the lack of available resources.
- Shifting priorities.

The project sponsor can sometimes believe his role is to push the boundaries hard, be supervisory and ignore any who doubts what is possible! The end result can be an overblown scope, hyper-expectant stakeholders and a project continually on the back foot.

Intervention(s)

Managing early over-enthusiasm needs to happen quickly. Whether it is the project sponsor or another stakeholder; if left too long, further discussions will have taken place between them and backtracking from having made illustrious promises will be difficult.

Techniques to consider as project manager:

1. Like Sir Humphrey in 'Yes Minister', acknowledge the worthiness of the campaign but suggest that you check the views and priorities of other key stakeholders and, 'importantly' the end customers to the project. Ask that nothing is announced until you have your findings. Contact a selection of stakeholders within the next 48 hours.
2. From their (and your own) views, prepare a product breakdown¹ of the key deliverables on one page and apply MoSCoW² to a list of these, on a separate page.
3. On meeting up again with the sponsor, firstly ask him/her to consider the product breakdown and jot down the most important 4-5 deliverables that he/she believes, at least initially, 'must'

to be returned by the project. Use your findings from the other stakeholders to gently challenge these and agree.

4. Agree to 'chunk' the project and focus fully on the first (descoped) stage. The benefits:

- Earlier delivery of the most important features
- A more manageable size of project with less risk
- A chance to revise scope after the first stage – the next requirements, after all, may well change!

5. Help the sponsor manage project communications by drafting and agreeing 'key messages for key stakeholders'.

¹Product Breakdown. [See APM Body of Knowledge](#)

²MoSCoW. [See APM Body of Knowledge](#)

Outcome(s)

The above (taken in order) should:

1. Nipping this in the bud will prevent/reduce mixed and exaggerated messages emanating from the project
2. This will help you clarify for yourself what the priorities should be. It will build your confidence.
3. 'Pushing back' to the sponsor, based on evidence like this, is more often than not respected. So fear not.!
4. Decomposing the project like this is a good discipline. It also builds confidence.
5. This enables you both to be 'on message' and be seen as 'under promising and over delivering'!

This pattern was written by the APM Stakeholder Engagement Focus Group.

- *For more information on the group or stakeholder engagement, [click here](#).*