

What's Wrong with This Picture?

Wayne Turk

The project is grinding to a halt. You're behind schedule and over budget, your people are unhappy, and upper management is screaming for results. What's the problem? Could you, the program manager, be at fault? Or is it something else?

Let's take a look at some problems, considerations, and potential solutions. But let me say this first: There is no golden bullet, no single panacea for all problems. Even the same apparent problem on different projects can be different. Every project is unique, thus the solutions will probably have to be unique, too. Yes, there are fixes that may apply to many project problems, but how to apply them, in what combinations, with what intensity, and with whose help, if any, makes the final management solution basically one of a kind.

Budget Problems

Budget issues, sadly, are one of the common problems facing PMs today. The first question is who determined the budget. Was it set by someone outside the project, or did you, the PM, determine what was needed? Was it realistic from the beginning? Was it estimated based on similar projects, and if so, what makes your project different? Was there a thorough cost analysis? Did someone make a mistake somewhere? Or was it just a guess—a frequent source of budget problems? Where did the inputs come from? Was something overlooked? If you set the budget, were you trying to keep it to the minimum to make it more palatable/acceptable to upper management? What exactly caused or is causing the budget problem: equipment, personnel, testing, development problems, something else, or some combination? Once you have thoroughly examined where the problem lies, you can try to fix it.

Probably the simplest in concept, yet the hardest fix to execute, is to revise the budget. Finding additional sources of funding or adding funding can solve the problem, but your chances are slim in most cases unless your project is critical and has some highly placed champions. If you were wise, you included a management reserve in the original budget. It's time to dip into it.

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If a revised budget is not possible, that means making other changes. Start with cutting out unnecessary requirements or even necessary ones whose absence won't ruin the project. You might want to try to find a cheaper technological solution. Applying spiral or agile development techniques can sometimes help and may give you results that can lead to more funding for the next phases. Review and delay—or even cut—equipment purchases. You could always take the draconian step of cutting people. But keep in mind that either of the last two could impact your schedule. Here are some other suggestions that might help, although most are usually for staying within a budget, rather than correcting overruns:

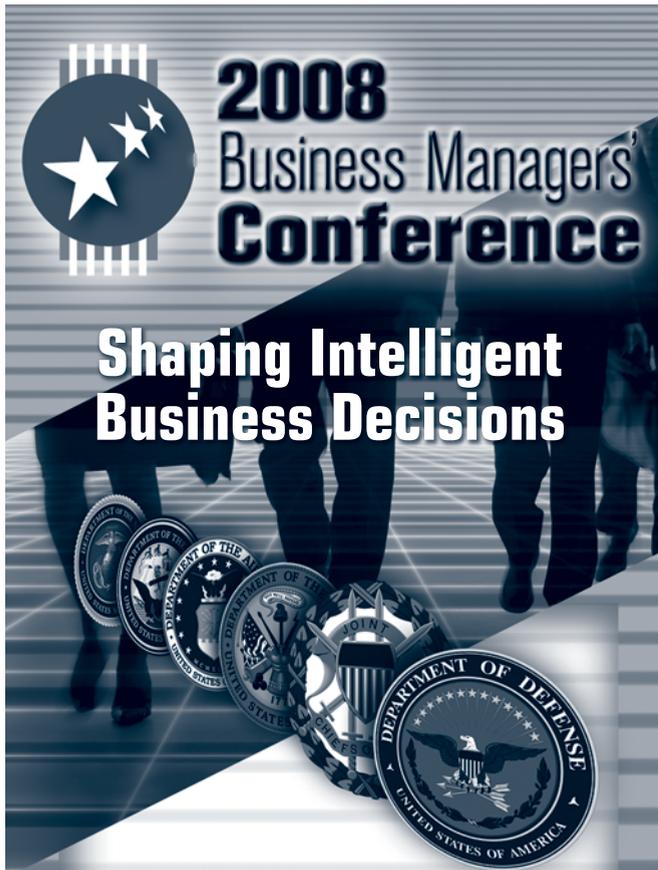
- Don't allow scope creep unless the dollars accompany the new requirements, and even then, try not to allow it.
- Use earned value management in some form to track costs and compare them to planned costs.
- Project upcoming costs and revise them as changes occur.
- Consolidate tasks for cost savings.
- Don't use "gold-plated" requirements.
- Use cost-benefit analyses to help you make decisions.
- Don't waste resources on unnecessary work.
- Do things right the first time; rework is expensive in dollars and time.
- Prioritize requirements and tasks so you know in advance what can be cut if it becomes necessary.
- Scrutinize contractor and vendor invoices for errors.

Schedule Slips

The questions for schedule slips are essentially the same as for the budget. The biggest questions, of course, are what exactly caused the schedule slip and how you'll get back on track.

Of course, revising the schedule to keep it realistic is the best answer, but there are other things that you can do. Usually the best way to compress a schedule is to consolidate as many of the tasks as possible or make them paral-

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lel rather than sequential. For example, it is sometimes possible in the software world to develop the software in modules. Work can proceed on multiple modules at one time. Then testing can be done on each module when ready, with final integration testing done at the end.

Cutting out requirements is another way to shorten project time. Maybe the eliminated requirements can be added back in for later versions (assuming the project results in a product, rather than a service). Don't reinvent the wheel. Leverage previously developed work from other projects. Use things (documents, plans, techniques, products, software, etc.) that others have spent time and dollars developing or buying. Get more people involved or have some work contracted out. Naturally, this can impact the budget. (Of course, you can always hope for divine intervention, but don't count on it!) Here are a few other helpful hints:

- Consolidate tasks where possible.
- Don't accept or assign tasks that are unnecessary or allow scope creep.
- Give all tasks a timeline or suspense.
- Assign responsibility for each task to a specific person.
- Set up a tracking system for tasks, suspenses, and action items and review the status at least weekly.
- Don't delay completing tasks until the last minute.

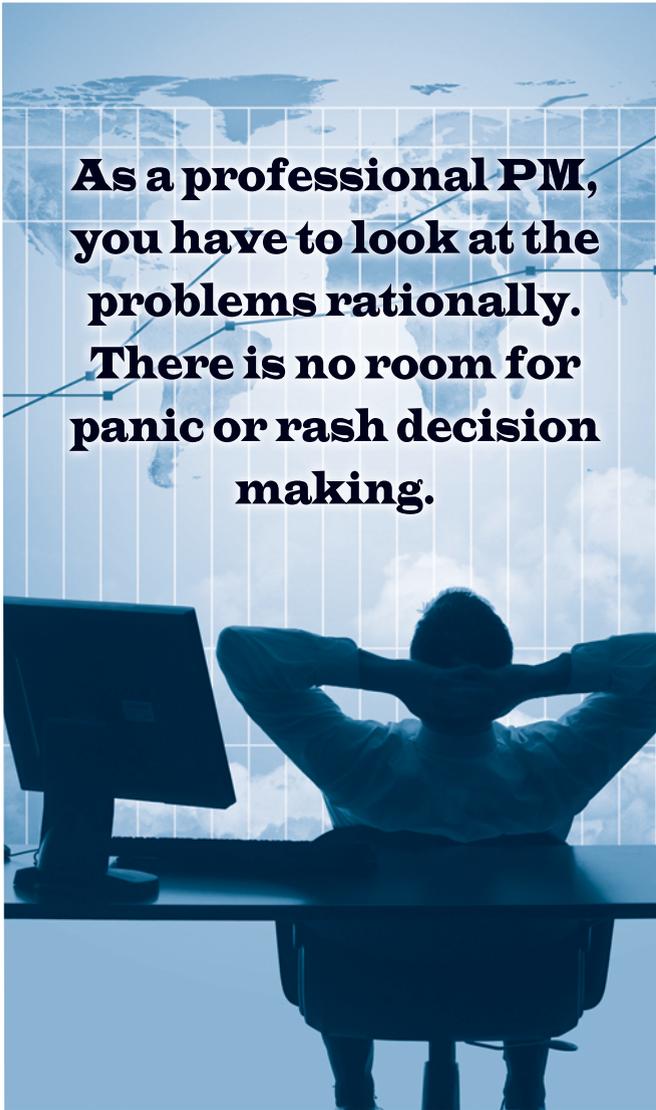
People

People problems are the easiest to see, but it is sometimes hard to diagnose what the real problem is. As for fixing them, that takes time and effort on your part as the PM. The problems can be broken down into three sub-areas: personnel, relationships, and communications, with some overlap in the last two.

Start with personnel. Do you have enough people? Do you have the *right* people with the right skills? Do they have the training and equipment that they need? Are they working on the right tasks? Those are all problems that you as the PM must solve. You can get help from other departments, but you are the one in the hot seat.

Relationships are a slightly different story. Are your team members motivated? Are there conflicts? Can they be resolved? Are your management techniques the right ones for the situation? Disagreements can be caused by conflicting needs, styles, perceptions, goals, pressures, roles, and personal values, as well as unpredictable policies. Conflict resolution is the topic for articles and books in abundance. There are also a ton of books and articles to help you with your management style and techniques. .

Finally, in the people category of problems are communications breakdowns. Communication may be the most important part of project management. Make sure everyone is aware of what is going on. Communicate



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up the chain, with your peers, and with your team. Give your team members feedback on their work and on the project status and plans. Keep them informed about what is happening, what changes are occurring, and why. Discuss problems with your team and listen to what they suggest as ways to fix the problems—finding solutions doesn't have to rest on your shoulders alone. Keep your boss informed. Let him or her know what is happening with the project on a regular basis. And communicate with others outside your organization who need to be kept in the know. Good communication can both prevent and resolve problems.

Technology

Technology problems are usually unique to your project, but again, there are some questions that you can ask. Do you have the right technology? Do you have the right support equipment, and are you using the best software for the job? Do your people know how to use what they have?

With the right technology (if your project is developing new technology) you can reap benefits for the users. Going the wrong direction can be a waste of time and money. Weigh the risks carefully. Are the benefits and costs worth it? Be realistic in the considerations. Using the right support technology and software can save time and money. However, your people have to know how to use it, and it has to be right for the project. Don't buy equipment or software because you think it is neat or because others are using it. Ensure that it is appropriate for your project. And if you can piggyback on another project and share their equipment and/or software (legally), do it.

And the Myriad Other Problems

There can be a myriad of other problems for a project. The following are just a few of the most common problem areas:

- Bad, vague, or unrealistic requirements
- Unintended consequences of actions or decisions
- Poor risk management
- No configuration management
- Not having good, repeatable processes or having bad or overstructured processes
- Vendor or contractor problems
- Outside influences, such as pressure from upper management or another agency.

Don't Panic

Every project has problems at some point. As a professional PM, you have to look at the problems rationally. There is no room for panic or rash decision making. You have to find a solution or set of solutions unique to your project. You don't have to depend only on yourself. Turn to your team or even to outsiders for help or suggestions. Talk with others who have more experience and who have faced similar problems. They can provide good guidance on what went right (or wrong) when they attacked problems. Do some reading and research. There are plenty of books and articles that can help.

The best idea, though, is to plan and implement the project correctly from the beginning. Lay out the plans, get the right people, ensure that you have the funding (or adjust to the funding that you do have), make sure the schedule is realistic, and so on. Whether it is the organization of the project team, the project management plan, or some other aspect, designing and putting the right project activities into place at the right time can help minimize the problems. So think it out in advance.

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