



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Handle Scope Change Requests with Appropriate Discipline

When a project begins, you must gain agreement with your client on exactly what you are creating. At a high-level, this agreement is reached through the approval of a Project Definition (also called a Project Charter). At a low-level, the agreement is reached through the approval of the business requirements. Once these two documents are approved, you have enough information to proceed through the remainder of the project.

However, like death and taxes, change is inevitable. There are two reasons. First, it is almost impossible for anyone to define ahead of time exactly what the final solution should look like, and so the requirements may change as the solution starts to evolve. Second, overall business conditions change over time. Some of this business change will force changes to the project scope in ways that are not known ahead of time.

So, what do you say when the inevitable changes start to come in? If you say yes without understanding the consequences to the project, you increase your chance of failure. If you say no, you may introduce conflict with the client, and run the risk of delivering a solution that does not meet the client's needs.

Don't Take it Personally – Use Your Process

The better response is to follow a scope change request process. This process should include understanding the business value of making the change, as well as the impact on the project budget and schedule. You then take this information to the project sponsor (or their designate) for an approval decision. Scope change management is really the art of letting the sponsor make the decisions, once they understand all the facts and implications.

As always, you should establish scope change procedures based on the size of the project. For small projects, you don't need to worry about scope change very much. The project will likely start and end before the business can change much, and most of the requirements are probably fairly well known. The project manager can quickly evaluate a small change request and work with the sponsor to determine if it should be accommodated.

For larger project, scope change is a big deal, and must be managed accordingly. The entire team, including the client, must be sensitized to understand when a scope change request is being made. The request should be documented and sent to the project manager. The change is analyzed and the resulting information regarding the change, the benefit, the cost and the impact of not accepting the change are brought to the attention of the project sponsor. The project sponsor then determines whether to accept the change or not. If they do, then the budget and timeline are changed accordingly. If the change is not approved, it is noted as such and the project continues on its way. The funny thing is, if you let the project sponsor decide on accepting scope changes, they will usually turn the request down. They understand the need to deliver something, even if it does not meet 100% of their needs, and then refine the solution over time. In fact, the sponsor typically



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has a lot less patience for scope change requests than the project manager, and this will eliminate the frivolous and marginal scope change requests immediately.

Summary

All projects need to first gain agreement on the scope and the business requirements before scope change management will stick. After that, the key to scope change management is to recognize that it is the process of letting the client make the scope change decisions. The project manager just needs to make sure that the appropriate information is presented so that the sponsor can make an intelligent, fact-based decision. Many project managers do a poor job of managing scope because they don't want to be seen as offending the client. However, that should not be a part of the equation at all. Instead, the project manager's job is to make sure the scope change management process runs effectively, and that the project sponsor has the information they need to make the best decision possible on whether the scope change should be accepted.