



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Managing Projects with Unrealistic Deadlines**

If you are a project manager dealing with what you perceive to be an unrealistic deadline, the first thing you will want to try is to discuss this with your manager and see if there are any factors that are driving the project deadline that you may not be aware of. Sometimes the person who tells you of the deadline seems like the bad person, but see if you can understand what the motivation is. For instance, there may be a business driver that is driving the deadline. There may be some event occurring that this project needs to support. Or your project may be one of a number of initiatives that need to come together at a specific time. It does not necessarily make your challenge any easier, but you may find that by better understanding the reason for the deadline, you may have an easier time getting yourself and your team members motivated to try to achieve it.

On the other hand, if the deadlines seem arbitrary and are not the result of some other business driver, then you should find that out as well. Sometimes managers set arbitrary end dates just to provide what they consider to be stretch objectives. However, this can end up like the story of the boy who cried wolf. If your manager is not careful, there will be a time when there is a firm business justification for an aggressive end date, but no one will believe it.

Once you understand the motivation for the deadline date, there are project management techniques that can be utilized to increase the chances of success and better manage expectations.

#### **Try to Adjust the Triple Constraints of Time, Cost and Scope**

All projects require some time and cost to create the deliverables agreed to in the project scope. When one of these constraints is out of balance, at least one of the others needs to be adjusted to get them back in alignment. For instance, if your budget is cut, you need to reduce the scope or increase the time to deliver.

For instance, if you find that the time constraint is not in alignment with cost and scope, talk to your manager about increasing the resources that are available for the project. Adding resources to the project makes the cost go up, but may allow you to hit the deadline. Also talk to your client about reducing the project scope. See if there are features and functionality that they can live without for now so that you can deliver the project within the deadline specified.

#### **Utilize Risk Management**

When you start a project, the first thing you need to do is the planning process. One aspect of the planning process includes identifying risks and putting plans into place to mitigate the risk. In your case, if you don't think you can hit the imposed end-date, now is the time to say something. When you do, your manager and your client start to hear that the end-date is at risk before the project even begins. As part of the risk identification, you can ask the project team, your client and your manager for their ideas on how to



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mitigate the risk. Utilizing risk management will help better manage expectations early in the project and also be a way to gather input and ideas for ways that you might be able to hit the deadline.

### **Utilize Scope Management**

On many projects, you start with an aggressive delivery date, and then the situation gets worse because the project manager does not effectively manage scope. Then you end up having even more work to do by the deadline date. Disciplined scope management will ensure that you only have to deliver what was originally promised, and that any approved changes are accompanied by a corresponding increase in budget and timeline.

### **Aggressively Manage the Workplan**

In many projects, you might get a little behind but have confidence that you can make up the time later. However, when you start a project with the deadline at risk, be sure to manage the workplan diligently. You have no margin for error. If early due dates start to slip, you are going to be in trouble early. As you monitor the workplan, treat missed deadlines as issues and work hard to solve the reasons behind the slippage. Again, get your team, management and clients involved. If your clients are causing delays, get more accountability from your business managers for helping to resolve project resource problems. Again, if the problem cannot be resolved perfectly, at least you are continuing to manage expectations.

### **Look for Process Improvement Opportunities**

Lastly, take an honest look at your workplan and your approach for executing the project. Talk to your team, clients, and manager about any ideas they may have for making the project go faster. This will get everyone thinking about being part of a solution. For instance, if your manager insists on completing the project earlier than what you have specified, ask him what techniques he could suggest to make the earlier date. Document any suggestions you receive. Show your client the project plan as well. If you are not achieving the end date they expect, ask them for ideas on how to shorten the project. See if they can help you come up with a solution to the scheduling problem, instead of just passively waiting for the project to be completed.

In addition, perform a self-evaluation of the project workplan and see if there are ways that you can reduce costs and cycle-times. For instance, are there some different development techniques that you could try that might decrease the end-date? Could you utilize a Joint Application Development (JAD) session to gather requirements more quickly than traditional interviewing techniques? Look at how you currently deliver projects and how you manage them to see if there are ways that you can accomplish what you need for less time and cost.

### **Summary**

In summary, although it appears that you are being held accountable for events and circumstances that are not within your control, you do have control over the processes you use to manage the project. First, see if you can balance the early deadline by



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increasing resources or reducing project scope. Second, proactively manage risk, scope and the workplan so that you can better manage expectations and have the best chance for success given the constraints you are under. Third, work with your manager, client and project team to evaluate how you are executing the project. You may discover ideas and techniques that will allow you to deliver the project sooner than you might have first thought possible.