The Impossible Dream

"I've got a really important project for you to run. I just promised our best customer, WidgetWorks, that our next product will be ready for them in six months. I'm sure you can do it!"

"But boss, the last time we did something like this, it took a year!"

"You'll have to get creative. By the way, money is tight, so I'm transferring Mary off your team. And I added several new features to the datasheet to keep WidgetWorks from defecting to our competitor."

"There's no way we can do that!"

"Have a can-do attitude! I'm counting on you to make it happen."

This sounds like a Dilbert cartoon, but it has happened to most of us. Call it "The Impossible Dream." You have been handed a project with impossible, immoveable constraints. How do you handle this situation?

Pitfalls

First, don't react by insisting that the project can't be done. Most organizations are under tremendous pressure to pull off astounding feats, so there is probably a real business need behind the impossible demands. If you dig your heels in without some facts, you are likely to receive a lecture on how to improve your "can-do" attitude.

On the other hand, don't passively give in. This will only cause firefighting, apathy and disillusionment later. You may be tempted to think, "Why bother to fight for reality when I already know what the answer is supposed to be. I'll skip planning and just go for it." At best, this "head in the sand" approach postpones recognition of impending trouble, and it might get you blamed for the project's failure.

> "Remember your sacred duty to disappoint … "
>
> David Schmaltz

A Better Way

What *can* you do that is constructive and is based in reality instead of wishful thinking? Here are some tips that I've learned the hard way,

Project Definition Phase

Clarify the *why* of the project before you become bogged down by the *how.* What is the business reason for doing the project? When you deeply understand the big picture, you can come up with better options and ideas on how to get there despite the constraints.

Be extremely clear about project's purpose and deliverables. Is everything absolutely necessary and crystal clear? Scope creep starts with a fuzzy baseline and unmanaged expectations, so devote extra attention to focusing the scope early, tightly and clearly.

Manage expectations aggressively, especially the expectations of the project champion and the management team. David Schmaltz says to pay special attention to the expectations of "the person 3 or 4 levels above you who

insists that the project be completed in 4 weeks. Remember your sacred responsibility to disappoint … only by disappointing the project champion with this news in the beginning can you delight him in the end …otherwise you end up being a slave to his unrealistic expectations, and instead of guaranteeing success, you're almost certain to produce failure." [1]

Project Planning Phase

Build a realistic baseline plan *first*. The plan must show a realistic approach, resources, features, and

> "Failure #10: Never bother to understand project tradeoffs: …Hard decisions are the perquisite of project management. Uninformed decisions, however, are its bane." [2]
>
> Pinto and Kharbanda

schedule, even if it does not meet the targets set by the impossible dream. This is your foundation for what-ifs, tradeoffs and negotiations. Without this firm anchor, you can't evaluate the impact of tradeoffs. Any planning you do will be untrustworthy because it is based on wishful thinking.

Do your homework. Working from your baseline, find tradeoffs and new approaches that will improve schedule, budget, or whatever is critical – but stay based in reality. How many people can you usefully apply to the project? Where are the biggest opportunities for cost savings? What happens if you creatively rearrange dependencies? Can you spend money to buy time, for example by buying better tools or by contracting with an expert?

Creative Options

Crash the schedule
    ▪ Shift people around
    ▪ Assign more people

Fast-track the schedule
    ▪ Re-arrange dependencies
    ▪ Do more in parallel

Go outside
    ▪ Outsource work
    ▪ Shift work to customer or partner
    ▪ Use experts

Re-estimate the project
    ▪ Find new approaches
    ▪ Minimize interrupts

Reduce scope
    ▪ Use the triple constraint
    ▪ Stage releases

Plan overtime   ▪ Use extreme caution!

Find options and negotiate. Develop several options, demonstrating various tradeoffs among cost, schedule and scope constraints. Present the pros and cons of each, make a recommendation, and ask your sponsor to help make a decision. Often people make better decisions when they can modify concrete options, rather than arguing from vague abstractions.

Project Execution Phase

Aggressively manage scope changes. You know things will change, so be prepared for it! Stay alert to take advantage of any changes that will help achieve the impossible dream. At the same time, maintain a laser-like focus so that "good but not vital" changes will not cause your project to lose focus or take on too much risk.

Manage risks intensively. Identify key risks that are likely to affect cost or schedule. Create and assign mitigation plans, monitor risks closely, and act swiftly to implement contingency plans when necessary. Frequently re-

evaluate your risk list and watch for new risks.

Communicate! PMI says that during the execution phase a project manager spends up to 90% of his or her time communicating. This is even more crucial in an impossible dream project where there is little margin for nasty surprises. Monitor status closely and when problems arise, raise alarms early, armed with facts and options.

Stick to Your Guns

Build a track record of doing your homework, communicating and escalating clearly, and always looking for ways to make the project successful. Tell it like it is, but don't "give in" or give up. If you do this, you're on your way to achieving the impossible dream.

[1] Schmaltz is quoted in *Dealing with A Project's Fuzzy Front End*, Loren Gary, Management Update, June 2003 page 4.

[2] *How to Fail in Project Management (Without Really Trying)*, Jeffrey Pinto and Om Kharbanda, Business Horizons, July-August 1996, page 51.

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