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Heading Down the Fast Track to Disaster

By: Ken Hanley (19 Oct 2001)

I heard it again this week - that lousiest of reasons to excuse poor and inadequate project management practices, the one that often masquerades as a declaration of speed and purpose. I'll bet you've heard it too: "This is a very important project - we'll have to 'fast track' it."

Spoken by someone who doesn't understand the disciplines implied in effective project management, these words should send chills up your spine.

The irony here is that fast track project management is a legitimate approach, most often seen in the construction industries. But I'll bet you fifty bucks that's not what they're talking about.

Does fast tracking a project underline its urgency? Should you fast track it to denote the importance of hitting a business-critical date?

Bah, humbug. Maybe I'm getting old and cynical, but I say that the declaration of a fast track project in most IT organizations is code for "We've publicly committed to someone important that we'd have this project done by a certain date."

Dig a bit, and you'll probably come to conclude that a fast track declaration should really be taken to mean: "We committed to (or were pushed into) a date before we really knew what we were doing, and it's too embarrassing for us to back down at this point, so we're gonna do this one stupidly."

The painful implication here is that project teams won't get the time, attention, or money they need to build an adequate plan, they won't get the resources to put adequate project control and reporting mechanisms in place.

In short, fast track usually means that none of the resources a team might bring to bear to give them a fighting chance of being successful with a fast track schedule are being taken away; practically speaking, it means that the team has been told to "just get going."

Take heart - there are defences against this type of idiocy, and the first of these is not to panic, to act as if the old saying was true: "A lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part."

Like most illogical and emotional declarations ("This project is critical to the future of this organization and all its employees!"), the best way to manage through them is by the jujitsu application of logic.

Project managers with a will to survive repeat after me: "I understand the importance of this project, I share your sense of urgency, and I want to help - starting by, of course, tripling the amount time and money we'll have to spend on planning for the project."

The reaction will be as follows: "You obviously didn't hear me - I said 'fast track' - we won't have time for all that!"

And you'll say (smiling pleasantly at all times): "I heard exactly what you said - we want to go fast track - fine - we all know, of course, that fast track implies much more planning than normal track - if we want to go faster, our project plans will have to be three times tighter, and our controls and reporting will have to be three times more rigorous than usual."

Reaction: "But we don't have the time or money for any of that!"

Here's what you'll feel like saying: "Just because you made a dumb commitment to a ridiculous end date before you had any bloody idea of what we were really up against doesn't mean that you can go faster by cutting out the planning and assigning the team to project hell for the duration!" Resist the temptation to say this.

Instead, count to three, and use an analogy: "It's really much like the car we chose to get somewhere fast - we all know that any old clunker can probably get up to 80 kilometres an hour without the wheels falling off, but when 80 isn't going to be enough, we also know that it takes something a whole lot different to get up to 200 kilometres an hour and stay in one piece. A car that can do 200 kilometres an hour is well engineered, highly tuned and well controlled. In short, it's very well planned." Emphasize the "well planned" part.

Not bad, huh? You have my permission to use it. Go ahead.

To elegantly extend the analogy, point out that: "You'd have to agree, of course, that a quality tachometer is critical to monitoring and controlling an engine that's driving a car at 200 kilometres per hour."

Done with the set up, now get 'em where you want 'em: "We all want this car, this project, to achieve the aggressive date that has been set for it, and I'll assume you'll want our project planning and control to reflect this same diligence and discipline."

Now go in for the kill: "In doing our part, we'll be spending much more time and money on project planning and management than we usually do, and we appreciate your support. We'll get back to you with what we need."

Real fast track recognizes reality: going much faster and still being successful is going to cost a lot more, take a whole lot more planning, and demand better reporting and controls.

Coming up: the cost/influence curve.

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