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In Search of The Anti-Hero

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"Fast track project." I heard these words again the other day, and it reminded me how much I hate them.

I'm convinced that when clients or senior managers say, usually in an officious and self-important tone, "This has to be a fast track project," what they mean is this: "We really don't have a clue about what we have to do to get this thing finished, but we're darned sure we know how much it should cost, and more importantly, how long it should take to do."

No secret here - you already know deep in your reptilian project manager brain that a project with an end date imposed before anyone really knows what the project has to deliver to be successful makes for really stupid, if optimistic, behaviour.

Such behaviour is also typical of one of worst types of PMs - the hero. "Sure, we can do that!" he'll say, trying to curry favour with management. The "we," of course, refers to the poor sods on the project team who are going to have to live with the misery that the stupidly optimistic PM's enthusiasm brings with him.

Granted, some end dates really are fixed (legislated changes with legislated deadlines, for example), and have to be respected. But respecting non-movable deadlines doesn't mean we have to be stupid in responding to them.

Fixed end dates mean the non-stupid/non-hero project manager says to management, in a calm and unemotional tone, "We'll take a look at what we can do by the deadline, and after some planning work (probably more than usual, since you'll want us to be moving more quickly than usual), we'll tell you how much money we're going to need to make that date, and how flexible we're all going to have to be in terms of scope and quality. We'll get back to you as soon as we can."

But now that you've made your stand, how do you manage in a sensible way to achieve that deadline, even if it is unreasonable?

Let me suggest three self-defence measures.

First, start with the end of the project in mind. Forget about the due date, and concentrate instead on what the project minimally has to achieve (note, I said minimally, since we're not going to have time for anything else) to be declared a success. What are the minimal, measurable set of deliverables that you need to declare victory?

Please note that we haven't yet said a thing about a deadline.

Second, plan backwards. Once you're clear on what the end point of the project is (i.e. the point at which you've delivered the minimal set of, well, deliverables) you should work backwards through the activities and tasks that have to be completed, all the way back to the

point you're at today i.e. the deliverables you have in your hot little hand right this very minute.

By the way, backward planning is a far more realistic way of looking at what needs to be done than old-fashioned, way-too-optimistic, forward-based planning is. Continue ignoring end dates or deadlines.

Third, build your first set of high-level plans, and estimate work effort and duration, preferably using multi-point estimates, with a complete and utter disregard for the completion date. Put that aside. Ignore it entirely. Really. Concentrate instead on what needs to be done and the people and money you'll have to do it with.

Once you've figured out what it will really take, and what that end date might be in a "normal" world (working as ridiculously hard as you usually do, with the resource constraints you're normally dealing with), then, and only then, can you start taking the deliberate steps of backing up to the imposed deadline.

The key questions you'll have to answer: what do we have to drop or compromise on to make the pre-imposed deadline, and just as importantly, what kind of additional resources/people/dollars will we have to throw at the thing to meet the imposed end date?

Don't worry about speaking up here...tell 'em what you'll need to drop to make it work and don't worry about asking for the additional resources you'll need to make the date work.

After all, you did tell management you'd get back to them with this information.

In fact, committing to any date at all before you go through the above three steps would be, well, just stupid.

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