

How to Accept a New Project Assignment



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Project managers need to ask the right question in that first discussion with the customer or sponsor.

1. Fast-food Order Taking
2. Happy at the beginning but not at the end
3. The best practice for that first discussion
4. The right way to accept a new assignment

The source of project failure very often happens in those first few minutes when a project manager gets a new assignment.

Fast-Food Order-Taking

The project manager arrives at the executive's office door, is waved in and takes a seat. The executive says, "That damn supply room is causing everyone fits and the supervisor hasn't got a clue about how to fix it. You know what's going on. I want you to put a team together with a person from each department and clean it up ASAP! I just sent the email out so you'll get maximum cooperation."

The executive smiles in dismissal and bends down to look at a paper on the desk.

The project manager nods eagerly and says, "We'll start work today!"

The executive smiles, "That's what I like!" and looks down at his paper.

The project manager asks, "When do you want the project to finish?"

The executive looks up with a smile, "Good question," thinks for a moment and says, "the end of next month."

The PM nods agreement and the executive glances suspiciously and says. "I want your personal commitment."

The PM nods, "You have it" and walks out.

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Three weeks later, the project manager is standing in front of the polished desk as the angry executive snarls, "Your project made things worse. Work is still delayed by missing supplies and people can't find what they want without a major search. This is another project disaster!

The PM pleaded, "But you never told me what you wanted?"

The executive sneered, "Get out!"

Happy Executives at the Beginning... or at the End

The PM did everything wrong by handling the first discussion like the worker at a fast-food drive-thru window. The PM had to guess at everything from how the executive would measure the project to what deliverables to produce. The only thing that was clear was the due date. The PM committed to that without out any idea or data about how long it would take.

The sad thing about this order-taking approach is that it makes executives happy at the beginning because they don't have to commit to exactly what they want and the project team starts work fast. But the odds of the PM delivering a successful project and having a satisfied executive at the end are just about zero.

The Best Practice for Starting a Project?

First, abandon the the fast-food order-taking. Agreeing to everything does not work. Instead, ask questions until you unearth the acceptance criteria the executive will use to judge the project when it is done. The project team cannot start work without it.

Asking these questions can irritate executives who don't know what they want. But the irritation is far less than what you will see after the project fails.

A savvy project manager responds to the anger at the scope questions with a reasonable statement like, "How can I deliver the business result you want if I don't know precisely what it is?" Executives may not like that push back. But it is worth a bit of early executive dissatisfaction if it gives the PM the opportunity to define a measured business result. Let's go back and see how to do this correctly.

Back to the Start; the Way it Should Work

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The project manager answers, "Exactly what problems do you want fixed?"

A flash of anger washes across the executive's face, "Just get started. I want it all fixed. When are you going to start work?"

The project manager says, "We'll start immediately after I understand the results you're looking for. What do you need to see at the end to decide that the project is a success?"

"Our people have to be able to get what they need fast!"

The PM says, "OK, how fast?"

The executive frowns in anger again, "How should I know?"

The PM politely responds, "Because you are the evaluator of our work. If a person could find what they want in a minute would that be good enough?"

The executive thinks for a moment and nods, then adds, "But the thing they want has to be in stock."

The project manager thinks for a moment and then asked, "We can't stock everything in the supply room. What percent of the time should the item be there?"

The executive nodded, "Well, if the item was in stock 95% of the time that would be good enough. Okay, that's what I want, when can you be done?"

The PM smiled and said, "Now that I know what you want I can plan the work to deliver it. I'll find out how many people I have to do the work and calculate how long it will take. Then I can give you a planned completion date."

The executive frowned and then gave the PM a curt nod and went back to work.

Summary

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