

Communications in Projects and Commitment

PrezSez 10-2008, by Dr. Lew Ireland, *asapm* President

Communications in projects is challenging at best and often leads to misunderstanding about what is to be done and when it is to be completed, or delivered. One of the most difficult situations that can lead is the lack of mutual agreement on commitment to perform a task or tasks. This is not the “how to” or technical aspect of projects, but the simply “what” and “when” of project work.

Often, “commitment” is believed to be obtained by the project manager from others whereas the actual delivery of the result of the task is delayed through lack of planning or forgetting about the task. How can this happen? The project manager is the single authority in the project and responsible for work getting accomplished.

One manager had a rule about commitment to perform. He stated that there were three ways of meeting a commitment.

- 1) Complete the task to a satisfactory level and deliver the results on time.
- 2) Return to him to obtain additional time or relief from the task
- 3) Bring your certified death certificate to him before agreed time of delivery.

Although this manager had a humorous way of expressing his desires for delivery of results once a commitment had been made, it was an expectation set that one should not fail to deliver or obtain from him a deviation from the original task. Needless to say, everyone followed through on commitments to perform.

Let us examine the definition of “commitment” to understand the dictionary meaning and to further enlighten us on what we are doing. The American Heritage Dictionary lists definitions as:

1. The act of committing: a giving of charge or entrusting.
2. A pledge to do something.
3. The state of being bound emotionally and intellectually to a course of action.

The dictionary gives us words such as “entrusting,” “pledge,” and “bound” to imply that a person making a commitment to another, whether the person is senior or junior, makes a solemn promise to do his or her best to meet that obligation – or obtain relief from that promise. Failing to deliver on the promise reduces one’s credibility in the eyes of the one to whom the promise was made. It does not take too many failed promises before there is an erosion of trust and lack of confidence in an individual’s competence.

Some real-life examples illustrate failures to meet commitments and the resultant effects on careers. These examples demonstrated that one should only make promises (commitments) that one can keep.

- A project manager of a major project committed to his bosses that the product delivery would be made on time and within budget, but failed inform them when it became obvious that the deliver would be late by several months. This resulted in a loss of confidence and his job.
- A project manager of a medium sized project promised several team members a pay raise if the project was successful. The team members put forth extra effort, working many additional hours. The project manager did not have the authority to grant pay raises, although he recommended salary increases. This resulted in the team losing confidence in the project manager and, probably, would not choose to work for or with him again.
- A project team member had a habit of promising to perform tasks, but would not commit to a specific time to complete anything. This left the project manager in a quandary as to which tasks would be complete in time for follow-on work. Typically, the work was late, forcing rescheduling and adjusting the workforce’s allocation. This resulted in a lack of disjointed effort and negatively impacted the project, which made the project team look less than effective.
- A project team member would accept tasks without clarification or complete understanding of the scope of the work. It was understood that he had sufficient information with which to complete the work. When he failed to perform the tasks to a sa-

tisfactory conclusion, he used the excuse that there was a communication breakdown – suggesting that the project manager had failed to fully explain the task. This resulted in rework and additional cost to the project.

- A matrixed team member worked on several projects because of his specialized, technical skills. He had to prioritize his work based on the size of tasks and the urgency of need among projects. It was his desire to please everyone and he always promised to complete the work on time. Unfortunately, he was not good at estimating how long each task would take overcommitted – i.e., he didn't have enough time to complete all the tasks. This resulted in only meeting those schedules where the project manager continually pressured him to complete the work. Needless to say, several project managers were displeased with his approach to work.

There are many examples of individuals promising to perform and failing. Failing to meet commitments erodes the confidence between individuals, regardless of whether the committing person is senior, junior, or peer. A person who consistently fails to meet his or her commitments damages his or her reputation as one who can be trusted to do what they say. Some examples of the outcome of failures to meet commitments are given below.

- Don't trust this person in anything they say or do because he or she does not live up to promises made.
- Don't work with this person because he or she creates more work by failing to meet delivery dates.
- Check frequently on this person because he or she has a habit of failing to deliver on time.
- If you have to work with this individual, team him or her with a trustworthy individual to report progress.
- Conduct business in a formal manner and place instructions in writing to avoid "misunderstand."
- Place this individual on low priority work to avoid project slippage if he or she fails to deliver on time.

One places his or her reputation on the line when promising to perform some task – it makes no dif-

ference about the importance or urgency of the task. A project team member is known by his or her ability to perform tasks in a satisfactory manner and deliver the product on time. One failure to meet a commitment may be explained, but several failures in a series defines a person's competence.

In conclusion, one should be cautious about making a commitment, or promise, unless the scope of activity is understood. Once a task is accepted, let nothing interfere with completing the task in a timely manner. Build a reputation for delivering on promises and encourage other project team members to also meet their commitments.

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Lew Ireland is an Executive Project Management Consultant based in Tennessee and serving both US and international clients. He has worked with clients to establish their project management systems to ensure they are supportive of the organizations' respective goals. He is experienced in all phases of project management that include planning, scheduling, project office implementation, project maturity modeling, and project assessment.

Lew has authored or co-authored project management books and articles for professional journals. He is a continual contributor to the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management*, regularly writing short articles for our website.

Lew has a history of serving for nearly 25 years in volunteer positions to advance project management. He is past President and Chair of the Project Management Institute and has served in various positions within the Institute. He has been recognized by the Institute for his contributions by the Distinguished Contribution Award, Person of the Year, and elected a Fellow of the Institute.

He serves as President of the *American Society for the Advancement of Project Management (asapm)*, a not-for-profit professional society dedicated to more effective project management practices.