

Plan Your Project (Excuses)

Question:

I am just starting the planning process on my project. What should I be most concerned about? Do you think estimating, scheduling, budgeting, risks and communication are important? It seems like a lot of work to me, but you always make it sound so easy. What is your secret?

Ginger

Answer:

Ginger,

It is a pleasure to meet you. By the way, did you ever get off Gilligan's Island or are you writing from there. It looks like they now have internet access. Did the Professor make a satellite dish out of a coconut and an old pair of shoes?

I am sorry to have funny at your expense, but seriously, how did the Howell's get all those clothes on the SS Minnow?

Okay, so it sounds like you have a project on the Island. You say you want me to tell you my secrets. I hate to do so since they are secrets, but I guess that is the purpose of my dear advice column to you. On the subject of project planning, I have two separate paths. First, I do very little project "formal" planning. I figure why should I? The client is going to change their mind a hundred times, and all of my plans will be obsolete anyway. If it is not that problem, then there are dozens of other problems that will keep you from being successful.

So where do I spend my time? Planning for excuses. This makes the most sense to me. Most project managers start to identify excuses for project problems when the project is 50% or 75% complete. I like to use the advice of that windbag Tom Mochal who states that we should plan much earlier. So, I accept his advice to start planning excuses very early in the project. Here are some of my favorites.

- **The client can't make up their mind.** This is a classic and can get you out of most jams. In fact, it is actually true on most projects. So, you can look like a hero and the client will look like the villain.
- **Vendor problems.** Do you have a vendor on your project? Make sure that they are set up to absorb blame for project problems. This is not deceptive. The vendor understands this is how the system works and they price this conflict and blame-game into their proposal.
- **Unknown risks.** I don't bother to plan for risks. No matter how well you plan, the risks that get you are the risks that you cannot see. Your managers understand this concept of risk and if you state that you got in trouble because of "unknown risks"

they will probably buy into it. Plus your manager may have contingency funding for these unknown risks and so you can sometimes get budget relief as well.

- **People problems.** You know the old standby – “I could be a better manager if I had better people”. It is also a classic. You can state this without naming names, so that your staff does not get too mad at you. Just state that you have people problems and you are working on it.
- **The project was destined to fail.** Yes, this is also an oldie but a goodie. Most projects are set up for failure before they even start. There is too much work for too little money and too little time. Your clients know this. So, when you state that the client was never destined to be successful, it will resonate with them. It would be nice if you have a name for this situation. It is called a project “death march”.

Summary

The key to planning is to understand ahead of time which is the best excuse or set of excuses for your project. If you come up with the “excuse scenario” that you will use at 50%, 75% and 90% in the project, then you will be able to get through the planning process itself very quickly and get on to the project execution.

Of course, this lack of planning will come back to hurt you later so be ready with your pre-defined excuses. See how this all makes sense?