Scope Creep Really Isn't All That Bad!

By Nick Pietrocarlo

Well I am sure the title got your attention. Scope creep really isn't bad?! What are you crazy? Scope creep is always bad?! Or is it…

Some Project Managers strictly enforce scope to make sure it does not change at all costs. Others won't even entertain the conversation of a scope change! Don't get me wrong; managing scope is one of the first and foremost parts of project management. A skill that requires experience and precision. But at times project managers may need to do a better job of understanding why scope may need to change.

Sometimes the original objectives are no longer relevant. Circumstances outside the control of the project can dictate a scope review or the Business may realize that a change in scope would help them

better service the needs and wants of the Customer. This may make a scope change desirable. At this point it would make sense to have a discussion to revisit the original objectives of the project.

Shouldn't a project manager be excited to discuss changes that might advance the agenda of the Business, The Company, and its' Customers? If you are a Project Manager who finds

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yourself about to start a scope change conversation, take a moment to "wind your watch"[1] and mindfully calculate your response. Your first words can't be a "NO".

Isn't it about doing everything we can as Project Managers to help the Business and the Company

be successful? Or to course correct a project that may be impacted by a change in the marketplace? Either way the Project Manager should embrace change. Change is inevitable and one should prepare for the change control process[2]. Not just try to prevent it. Hmm…makes sense to me but let's turn to some psychology on those two letters, "N" "O".

"NO" can be a mechanism to reinforce ones integrity. Or it can be used to prevent someone from being exploited or taken advantage of.[3] In the context of oneself, a Project Manager may develop a reflex to say "NO" due to unpleasant experiences in her past. These habits may be hard to change but a Project Manager must strive to be aware of their blind spots. Saying "NO" too quickly is certainly one of the worst blind spots to have. I personally feel that "NO" sounds much more negative than "YES" or "WHY".

Another dimension to the problem is IT (Information Technology) departments have developed a reputation for saying "NO" before anything else. The Business starts to expect that. From

the Help Desk, to Global Business Solution Managers, to IT Executives. This unfortunate state seems to be developing in many organizations. It is unfortunate that the Business's anticipation of a "NO" before the word is uttered defines many IT departments today.

Let us ponder for a moment changing the "NO" to a "WHY"?

"WHY" is that change required? "WHY" are those changes beneficial? Take the time to understand "WHY" and have a conversation.

In addition I would challenge any project manager to "Be The Business" and learn to think like the Business and Customer. This would help develop a new Project Manager reflex. One that can anticipate the change before the Business even requests it.

Let's use an analogy here…appropriately, it is about fighting fires…which we do happen to talk a lot about in IT. We in IT love to fight our fires, about as much as we like to think out of the box…

A 911 call is placed (by the Business) to emergency services (the PMO) who dispatches fire fighters (a Project Manager and her project team) to address a report of a house on fire (the Project's Scope).

With a sense of urgency the engine turns over and the fire fighters board the truck (Initiation). With scope clearly in hand; the firefighters put on their headsets and communications start flowing (Planning). As the siren blares, they finalize their approach (Project Plan) as they arrive on scene. As the fire fighters jump out of the truck their focus is now on the task at hand (Execution and Control).

As the hoses crisscross the lawn the fire commander (Project Manager) notices sparks have gone airborne from the smoldering roof. Now the neighbor's house has started on fire (Scope Creep).

The commander acting on her instincts immediately jumps on the radio and requests another team of fire fighters so that her team is not overwhelmed with the current task at hand (Change Control Process). Or does

she? Would the fire commander (Project Manager) instead turn to her team and say, "sorry folks our scope is just to put out the fire we were called about, this other house, well, it's out of scope." Would she tell the neighbors (the Business) that she is unable to fulfill that request due to it being outside of the original scope. I hope not as this would be a clear recipe for failure.

That just doesn't seem right does it? Some Project Managers get so fixated on maintaining original scope. They do not see the burning issues that could easily be corrected. Supporting and advocating a scope change or addition can rectify this. In the analogy above, not addressing the scope change could lead to additional loss of property or much worse.

In extreme cases not changing a project's scope can be responsible for the failure not just of a project but possibly the company.

Meanwhile the fire is now out (Scope Complete) and the Red Cross (Operations) has arrived on the scene to help the folks that have been impacted by the fire. The Fire Commander (Project

Manager) has passed control to the Red Cross (Closing) and is wrapping up her efforts.

I grew up in IT through Project Management. And throughout the many projects I managed I was never able to come to terms with those two words, "Scope Creep".

I realized to try better judgment as opposed to just saying "NO" after every request from the Business. If the Project Manager sees an opportunity to improve something for the Business (in this case saving a house) than they should not hesitate to act. Not necessarily changing scope themselves, but raising the discussion openly with priority and candor[4]. If you are "Being The Business" you may even know why the request has come up in the first place. Better yet it may even be your idea!

If you are still in doubt then ponder the words of the PMBOK and come to terms that Scope Creep is not bad, it is merely a part of a project that needs to be expected and managed.[5]

As the Project Management discipline continues to build

its brand in the public and private world, my hope is that the mindset of project managers will evolve so that they look beyond the out dated processes and methodologies and focus on a more common sense.

Everyone knows the right thing to do was putting out that fire at both houses.[6]

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[1] Robert Conrad, The Malibu Mirage, Views from a JetProp, Volume 13 Number 1 Spring 2004

[2] Project Management Institute, Inc., A GUIDE TO THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT BODY OF KNOWLEDGE,(PMBOK® Guide) — Fourth Edition, 4.5 Perform Integrated Change Control, p. 93

[3] Judith Sills, Ph.D., Psychology Today, The Power of NO, October 2013

[4]http://ferrazzigreenlight.com/article/encourage-candor-work

[5] Project Management Institute, Inc., A GUIDE TO THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT BODY OF KNOWLEDGE, (PMBOK® Guide) — Fourth Edition, 5.5 Control Scope, p. 125

[6] http://www.firehero.org/