

The Sponsor Knows Nothing....

Thus speaks the first law of Project Management.

Actually the law is much more positive than it sounds. I suppose it sounds rude, but it is trying to make a very important point, which is 'do not assume that your sponsor knows anything...'

It is useful to spend a moment wondering why your boss (the 'sponsor', in project management terms) asks you to run a project for them.

There are only two reasons why this happens. The first reason is less common, but happens a lot in high-tech organisations (where the boss thinks that they still have up-to-date technical knowledge); the boss could run the project themselves, but hasn't got the time, and is asking you to do it on their behalf.

The second reason is the more common. The boss hasn't got the technical knowledge to run the project, and, using practical delegation skills, is asking you to exercise your technical knowledge and run the project on their behalf.

In both of these cases you are being asked to do two things: one is to deliver the outcome of the project, but the second thing is often overlooked or not realised by both parties. You are being asked to do all the thinking on behalf of the boss, as they either don't have the time or the detailed technical knowledge to think it through for themselves.

Hence the name of the role you are taking on: project manager, not project slave.

If you think about this project initiation transaction that is taking place (no matter how informal it might be), you really don't want the boss to think it through in any detail, as this may lead to the apparently helpful 'and I suggest that you do it like this...' comment from the sponsor. This can be very dangerous, as it may accidentally stifle your creativity and initiative just when you need it most.

Of course your sponsor is the main source of the parameters that describe the project: the initial Business Objectives, Scope, Constraints, Deliverables, and Governance will all start from the sponsor's request. But you must not just take these parameters at face value. You must validate them during this initiation process, because the sponsor has not thought it through.

Obviously we all hope that these details are correct, but you will earn no thanks if you blindly follow the sponsor's initial statements. I think it is useful to start calling the Project Charter or Project Initiation Document a 'draft' from as early as possible, to get everyone thinking that it will have to be refined during the initiation process.

The initiation process should be seen as an excellent opportunity to communicate primarily with the sponsor but also with other useful key players, who may be able to throw light on the project parameters before it is too late.

All of this leads to a clear statement of Project Management Law number 1; the sponsor knows nothing (do not assume...).

If we take this Law in a positive manner we can extend its use to include not just that the sponsor may know nothing about the nature of the project, but the method of approach may be unclear to them as well.

Use this early stage of the project to explain to the sponsor how you might undertake the work, at least in outline.

A useful approach to this discussion may centre around the concept of 'cheap versus expensive'.

Every project has two ends, a cheap end and an expensive end. Obviously the cheap end is the start, where we may have just a few people sitting around a table trying to identify and agree on the shape of the project and its outcome. At this early stage we can afford to throw away our initial ideas, and start again. It may be embarrassing, but if we don't discover that our ideas are wrong until the expensive end we may be forced into implementing something less than ideal, with a vague promise to fix it all 'in release 2'.

So it is very useful to use the cheap end as an opportunity to challenge all the thinking about the project. If it can survive an exhaustive examination at the outset, then, at least, we can start in the right direction.

If all the key players simply accept the very first draft of the Project Charter, then we may have a bomb in our project, and it will go off down at the expensive end, when our options and room to manoeuvre are limited.

Of course, it can be very galling to have your wonderful Project Charter or Plan torn to shreds by a group of 'helpful' colleagues, but you have to get over it. When do you want to find out that your plan has a great hole in it?

It can also take time. The quickest way to produce a plan is to lock your office door, turn off your phone, and just go for it. It will be quick, but it won't be any good. The best way to produce a Charter or Plan is to involve as many other people as possible. It takes longer, but in the longer term....

So maybe the first Law of Project Management should be rewritten; The Sponsor and the Project Manager know nothing...