

Why Project Managers should be shot.

Well, that title got your attention, but I'm guessing that you're expecting a clever punchline here that explains why the poor Project Manager shouldn't really be shot?

Sorry. I don't have a clever punchline.

If you miss – or more accurately from a linguistic perspective, if you "step over" – the deadline, then the odds are that you're going to get shot. At least, that's what should happen.

Let me explain.

Firstly, I should explain the generally accepted origin of the term "deadline".

It has nothing to do with projects, or even dates. It's slightly more serious. According to the all-knowledgeable Wikipedia, the term "deadline" originated from prison camps and referred to a physical line or boundary. The line was generally set some way back from a boundary wall, in full view of the guards and their guns.

You can see where this is going. If a prisoner stepped over the line – the deadline – they were shot. It made escaping a bit trickier (and probably led to an increase in in-prison sales of spades).

Secondly, I should also explain that I'm not a fan of imprecise use of language, nor of saying one thing and meaning something else. And as the term "deadline" seems to have become the generally used term to describe any sort of date within a project's plan, it annoys me every time that I hear it.

I don't suggest that "deadline" should only be used where someone is about to get shot.

I do suggest that we differentiate carefully between the various sorts of dates that are typically used in project planning and project management. If all PMs who had failed to meet a deadline had been shot, there'd be a shortage of PMs by now.

So what date terms should we use in project language?

1. The Aspiration Date

In the initial phases of a project, most dates will be aspirational.

Aspirational dates will be set by the hopes of the initiator, often the sponsor or the business manager who wants a project to deliver something by a particular date. And it should be seen as little more than a "hoped-for" date. In the initial phases of the project (by which I mean the initiation, definition and planning phases) there will be little certainty about any aspect of the project – including precisely what it will need to deliver, the resource that it will have at its disposal, the various constraints and dependencies within which it must deliver, etc. Given those unknowns, it would be a little foolhardy to set firm dates.

We lose the means to communicate how serious any project-related date actually is (or isn't) and we lose the motivation to achieve it.

Why Project Managers should be shot.

2. The Target Date

It might be convenient for PMs if projects completed their full life cycle subject only to aspirational dates. But that wouldn't really require much project management skill, and wouldn't deliver much certainty to the organisation. So we introduce target dates.

The primary difference between these is that the target should be underpinned by commitment from the PM that it is achievable, based on resolution of the various unknowns which occurs through the planning process. One of the PM's responsibilities is to prepare a plan to guide the work of the team. Target dates should be calculated and committed to by the project team, not imposed.

Sometimes a target date won't satisfy the aspirational date. In which case one must change. That may be through a reality check for the aspirant, or perhaps a re-plan by the PM. There is no value in merely changing the target dates to converge with the aspirational date without ensuring that the new dates are equally achievable (usually by relaxing one or more of the applicable constraints).

3. The Deadline

Yes, there is still a place for deadline dates in my project management world. These are genuine, mission-critical dates which, if not achieved, will have significant (usually adverse) consequences for the organisation into which the project is delivering. Deadlines will often be set by external constraints that are genuinely immovable. The activity generated by "Y2K" is a good example. Systems had to be ready by a date that wasn't going to change. There were many forecasts of nuclear meltdown and planes falling from skies if the date was missed. Those were serious consequences.

It may also be that a project isn't worthwhile if it can't be delivered by a set date – an aspirational date that is also effectively a deadline. A business opportunity may be missed, or a penalty already incurred, if that date is missed. In such situations, the project must have sufficient resource, or a reduced scope, such that the PM can prepare a plan in which the target dates converge with the deadline and aspirational dates. Merely shouting at the PM and team to do stuff quickly won't work.

A deadline must have consequences (perhaps not quite those that gave rise to the term originally) but real and serious consequences rather than empty threats or fears. Otherwise the term loses its meaning, as it has done after years of casual use in the PM world. And we lose the means to communicate how serious a particular date actually is, and we lose the motivation to achieve it.

I've seen too many projects miss deadlines, but I've yet to see a PM shot. I'd prefer not to start now.

Contact the author



In partnership with



www.deliveryconsulting.com
www.synatus.com

tonyvince@deliveryconsulting.com

About Us

A small independent company working with client organisations to initiate, design and deliver challenging change programmes, including operational & performance improvement, IT systems design & implementation, corporate restructuring & transformation and responding to changing regulatory requirements.

© Delivery Consulting, 2013.

No part of this document may be reproduced with prior approval of the authors.