Tight, Inflexible Deadlines: Scourge of Projects

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Deadline: The line on the ground in a military prison, beyond which the prisoner shall be shot dead.
—based on the Oxford English Dictionary

Do You Have Deadlines?

Do your projects have unrealistically tight deadlines? Why? Where are your areas of flexibility? We've asked these questions for years of Executives, Project Management Office consultants, Program Managers, Project Managers and Team Members. All too often we hear that yes, many projects and programs do have deadlines, or unrealistic and inflexible dates by which they must be completed.

Defense Contractor Programs may have deadlines that coincide with September Federal year-ends—if a buyer needs to spend money before the year is over. Some project deadlines relate to calendar year-end cycles; others relate to slow periods, or to the calm before the retail storm for holiday seasons.

But in cases where individuals cannot cite the reason for the deadline, or when there appears to be no flexibility in other factors, such as more-available or more-skilled resources, or when funding and scope are also inflexible, *unnecessary project risk* results.

Inflexible deadlines may be evidence of frustrated Managers who feel they have no better way to control projects in their organization. They may be an attempt to cause the team to show the same sense of urgency Managers feel. Excessive use of deadlines in an Enterprise may result from a lack of communication or Management Malpractice—or both. Whatever the cause, it is **not** project competence.

The Problem With Deadlines

Even when we have good intentions, Managers who impose unrealistic deadlines place unnecessary barriers upon project teams. Some exacerbate the problem by tightening budgets; for example, when a team requests the needed funding, those Managers cut the requested funding by 10% or more.

These bad habits are not only management malpractice, but are also trust-breaking. Of course, some teams "pad" their later project estimates to perpetuate this cycle of malpractice.

Do these practices sound familiar? There are unnecessary, undesirable consequences: Unrealistically tight deadlines result in longer-duration projects than desired, and 42% higher cost (Boehm 2000), lower quality, longer time to benefit realization (if ever) and frustrated and dissatisfied team members. Effective Managers who understand the consequences would avoid crippling a project in this way.

Let's carry this deadline impact a step further. Inflexible and tight deadlines result in *fear, threat and pressure* for the team. This induces adrenalin into the most primitive part of our brain (the reptilian brain), causing us to react rather than plan, work in solitary instead of teaming, and apply obvious solutions instead of intelligent or brilliant ones.

But Timelines Are *Important*

Some time targets are critical. Example: the 2008 Beijing Olympics in China. The target dates for a huge number of projects do have some flexibility, but within limits. For example, it would not do for the Olympic Stadium construction program to end one or two months after that stellar event.

In the USA, a National Election scheduled for November cannot be delayed to December just because the "new, improved" voting machines have not been fully tested. There must be alternatives.

And yet, too often the majority of Enterprise deadlines are tight and inflexible, *yet totally arbitrary*. In the exceptions, there is almost always some flexibility in funding, staffing, other resources, or the possibility of staging scope delivery so the time-sensitive portions are delivered by the due date.

Deadlines versus Due Dates

We make a distinction between Deadlines and Due Dates. Deadlines are *imposed*, and Due Dates *agreed upon*. While unrealistic deadlines are a scourge, Due Dates are the **achievable dates** when the Enterprise needs the results. Finding the areas of flexibility in projects having business-driven due dates is the key.

As mentioned above and emphasized in our *Levers and Gauges* article on the our website, the project flexibility need not be with the due date; it can be in the scope, resources, costs, or other factors. The consequence: Better, Faster and Cheaper (or more cost-effective) results.

The Needed Management Action: Use Due Dates instead of unrealistic deadlines to reduce fear, threat and pressure for the team. The result: you reduce cost, improve quality, speed the results and improve the return on investment.

A Better Way: PM Competence

Effective Portfolio Analysis and Project Initial Planning present the opportunity to prevent or mitigate the majority of challenges most projects face. Many project risks realized are the consequence of choices made (or not made) early in the project—often even before a Project Manager is assigned.

And one of the most frequent challenges is the scourge of unrealistic and inflexible project deadlines. Early in every project there are a variety of ways to meet the time : cost : scope : quality trade-offs presented by business needs. Meet your needs by managing areas of flexibility to allow the project to succeed from start-up through benefits realization.

Where does one find those areas of flexibility? Look for the answer in the IPMA Competence Baseline (ICB) for Program and Project Management. Each Technical Competence (and many of the Behavioral ones) has a role in establishing flexibility and manageability; here are some examples of the topics, as identified by the ICB elements:

2.1 Project Success Criteria: you must agree how you and your stakeholders will measure success.

2.2 Stakeholders and Interested Parties: you must know who they are, and the roles they commit to fill.

2.5 Project Quality: is lower quality an acceptable trade-off for rapid completion? Will all stakeholders and interested parties agree?

2.10 Product Scope: is there a time-sensitive part of the product that can be delivered within the due date, with the remainder completed after the due date?

2.12 Schedules: what drives the due date? What is the consequence of delaying the results?

2.13 Resources: if the project is indeed time-sensitive and important to the Enterprise, can the time of existing team members be increased, or more team members or higher-skilled members be added?

2.14 Cost: given funding, can parts of the solution be sourced from outside the Enterprise? This can include expertise or completed product components.

Clearly, competent Program and Project Managers who **apply** these competences, rather than just knowing about them, have many options. And this is just a sampling. See the power of PM Competence?

What is a *Tight* Due Date?

Given that PM Competence helps us understand multiple areas of flexibility, how do we recognize a **tight** due date? And, how does one know as early as Portfolio Analysis that a deadline or due date is unrealistic? We don't really know project size until we have Requirements (also known as specifications)!

There are several parts to the answer. The first: better early measures or estimates of scope, effort and cost. Scope traceability from inspiration through benefit realization is a key to better estimates. Of course, consistent process and good estimating history are also essential. And add trust and open communication between the team and their Managers.

Another part, given the above (most Project Managers wish it was a given), is a way to know, based on early estimates, what the ideal duration *should* be. Boehm's work with software projects, cited above, showed a 42% increase in effort and cost resulting from a deadline that was 75% or less than ideal for the project's scope and staffing. Then *what* is ideal?

Based originally on formulas by Putnam (Putnam, 1980) and Boehm, a model helps answer that question. See *The Successful Project Profile*, in the articles section at our website.

The Successful Project Profile model identifies the ideal duration, staffing and Project Manager role for any medium or large project.

As early as Portfolio prioritization (given traceable scope and early estimates) the model is also useful in planning duration and staffing needed for the projects and subprojects of programs or initiatives.

The *Successful Project Profile* model shows the risks of significant variances both above and below the ideal duration, and of inadequate or excessive staffing. This model is a competitive advantage of those who have used it for over 25 years.

Clearly, given effective communication of the ideal duration and staffing of a project, there remain only two excuses for having an unrealistically tight deadline: Project Management Incompetence or Management Malpractice.

Summary

Consistently in our workshops, when we ask the question, "*How many of you have tight project deadlines?"*, most people in the class raise their hands.

Then we explain the difference between inflexible, unrealistically tight deadlines and *manageable due dates*, and we again ask the question. We still get *way too many* responses. This indicates a huge opportunity for improvement in most projects, and in many Enterprise project climates.

Incompetent Project Managers have deadlines. Competent Project Managers have Due Dates, with multiple areas of flexibility. Part of your demonstration of competence as a Project Manager is whether you continue to be victim of unrealistic, inflexible deadlines, or you manage the move to smarter due dates.

Ineffective or frustrated Managers establish unrealistically tight and inflexible deadlines when we know no better, or when we feel we have no other option. What effective Managers really want is not tight deadlines at all, but successful and responsive projects.

As now recognized by most PM societies, this shows the need to move beyond knowledge-based PM Certification programs. Effective Managers do not want Program and Project Managers who **merely know why** their projects failed. We want Program and Project Managers who **demonstrate the competences and performance** that cause project success.

Successful projects have due dates, and they meet them. Unsuccessful projects too often have unrealistic, tight and inflexible deadlines. They not only fail to meet them, they deliver less, and they fail to meet the business need. It's your choice.

Bibliography

IPMA's Competence Baseline is available for download from the website, www.ipma.world.

Competence-based PM Certification: See the USA's Four-level Competence-based Certification of Program and Project Managers at IPMA-USA's website, www.ipma-usa.org.

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Putnam, Lawrence H. *Software Cost Estimating and Life-Cycle Control: Getting the Software Numbers*. Computer Society Press, IEEE Computer Society, 1980.

About the Author

STACY A. GOFF, *the PM Performance Coach*™, has coached and inspired tens of thousands of project and program managers, and hundreds of organizations, on five continents, for over forty years. A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and consultant since 1982, he has also been a strong contributor to professional organizations such as IPMA® and PMI® since 1983.

He is a co-founder and past-president of IPMA-USA, and 2011-2014 Vice President of Marketing & Events for IPMA, the International Project Management Association. In September, 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow.

Goff's interest in project competence and performance began with establishing a PM Competency Center for a nuclear power plant in the early 1980s.

It continued with international engagements during the 1980s and 90s as he helped organizations assess and improve their project and program performance.

Today, he coaches, speaks and performs keynote speeches at major project-related events. And, he continues to pursue his interest in individual, project team, organization, and national and international PM performance.

Mr. Goff brings a results-oriented approach to Project Management coaching, consulting, and training. His insight for the needed PM Competences, and his delivery of effective training translate to improved project performance. In his working life, he combines his Project experience with sensitivity for the interpersonal skills areas—the human aspects of projects.

In his papers, presentations, workshops or in consulting, he combines his project experience with strategic linkage for all projects and programs. His insights and experience have provided competitive advantage for his clients for over 40 years. His business result: measurably increased **PM Performance.**

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