

## Scope Creep: Change Control that Works



**By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA**

**Effective change control not only improves the odds of finishing on time and within budget but it gives us satisfied customers/users/clients. It's all in the technique.**

There is probably no dumber phrase in project management than "There will be no changes to this project." Every project has changes and trying to stop all of them just causes:

1. scope creep and/or
2. unhappy sponsors/clients
3. both 1 & 2 (the most likely result).

Let's look at the alternatives and see what works and what doesn't.

### Typical Change Control Approach

The project stakeholder bursts into the project manager's cubicle, points an indignant finger at the PM's nose and says, "I've found another mistake in that project plan of yours! After talking to the project team member who's working on task #37, "Improve Phone Service for Customers", I'm very disappointed. I need 14 new data fields on the customer history system, not the 3 data fields you're giving us!"

The PM tries to look beyond the pointing finger and then says, "That would be a major change in the scope of the project."

The stakeholder shouts "That's not a change at all! It's the heart of giving our customers world class customer service."

"It is a change. Remember you signed the requirements document and that said just 3 data fields."

"Do you think any of us understood that techno-geek double talk? You have once again ignored the needs of the business and we're headed for the usual result from your projects... nothing of value. I need 14 fields."

"That is a major change that will..."

The stakeholder said, "I'm going to have to escalate this to the VP."

"Fine," the PM replied, "the requirements document and your signature tell the story."

Two hours later, the VP tells the PM told to "squeeze in" the additional data fields in the interest of user relations with, without any increase in budget or duration.

This event sets an unfortunate precedent and is usually repeated week after week. Soon any chance of finishing on time is gone. For consultants and other fee-for-service professionals this scope creep without additional fees can turn the whole engagement into a loser. On top of that

the stakeholders who generate all these changes are usually unhappy with the project at the end, despite all the money and time invested in "keeping them happy." The key to this failure is the all too common failure of the PM to clearly establish what is, or what is not, a change of scope. A change entails not only more deliverables but also more work, fees and a longer duration. Scope creep is where you produce the extra deliverables without additional budget or time.

## How Change Control Should Work

A stakeholder rushes into the PM's office and says, "We need 11 more data fields on the customer history screen or the project will fail!"

The PM smiles, runs a finger down the WBS and then says, "Well, that customer history screen is critical to hitting our achievement #345 "answer phone inquiries in less than 120 seconds."

"Right!" the stakeholder shouts, "And with the additional 11 fields we can do even better!"

The PM smiles and says, "But we don't need the 11 extra fields to hit the baseline achievement do we?"

"No, but I have some great ideas that will let us cut the time to less than 90 seconds with those extra fields!"

The PM says, "Oh I'm sure the ideas are great but we don't need those fields to hit the current achievement. Now you can certainly improve the achievement but that is a change in scope and will almost certainly increase the project budget and duration. Shall we proceed with the change request?"

The stakeholder frowns, "The VP won't approve anything but tiny increases."

The PM replies, "Let's look at that new higher performance level you want to hit and see if we can't come up with a cheaper, '80% solution' that would give you most of what you want at a lower cost increase and be a little easier to sell to top management."

## What Was Different?

When we compare these two scenarios we see a couple of very important differences. First, there was no debate about what was, or was not, a change in the scope of the project. In the first scenario the deliverable was a vague statement of "world class customer service." In the second, the deliverable was a quantified achievement, "answer customer calls in 120 seconds." Having the measured achievement made a big difference.

Second, the discussion was not at the level of features, functionality and requirements. Rather, what they discussed was the level of performance in the stakeholders' operating department. The project manager was not trying to base change control only on highly technical specifications. Instead the PM used a quantified business outcome to define the scope of the deliverable.

Third, both the project manager and stakeholder were operating in a clearly defined change control process that demanded quantification of changes and also specified who has the authority to approve what size of change to the project.

Fourth, they were able to discuss trade-offs between various levels of business performance and the cost and duration impact of each.

This last point is an important one. PMs doing projects for customers or clients almost always have a budget which makes the cost of changes clear. But many internal company projects don't have a budget, which means the project and any changes to it are "free" in the minds of the stakeholders. That's why a project budget is always worth having in your fight against scope creep. Even if the project budget doesn't "count" the way a departmental or divisional budget does, having a budget lets us quantify the cost of every change.

## Summary

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