

# People on projects

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## The Project Management Best Practices Report

### Product/Project Insights

## Just in Time or Just in Case?

"I have made every schedule and commitment for every project I have ever led"

**by Dennis Smith** | Over the past few years, I have had several people tell me that they make every plan. While I'm sure they are proud of their record, and they may, in fact, have done it, I always wonder if what they did to make the project schedule was also best for the business.

No doubt, a well controlled and well-planned project makes for boastable results for the project leaders and for the business, but is a planned and locked-down project what's best for the business in the long run? It may not be the best for the business, but it certainly makes the business look best.

### The "Just in Case" Project

The "just in case" project is built with contingencies, padding and conservatism. It is built to a schedule to *allow* for success in spite of any circumstance. This approach allows the project to take care of itself in not having to expose issues or weaknesses or even scope changes, as long as the changes all fit neatly within the contingencies that have been put in place to insure project success.

The advantage of this approach is that the results look good. They look good to the management, look good on the leaders' resumes, and look good to

the investors. And as Brad Blanton says in *Radical Honesty* (Dell, 1996), "What is normal is to be concerned foremost with having a good cover story. Normal people are concerned with figuring out the right thing to say that puts them in the best light. They want to live up to their own best guess about what the people they are talking to want to hear."

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Contingencies, padding, and conservatism aren't always the best approach to project planning. Sometimes the "horse race" has an unexpected ending.

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This always-make-it style also plays well into the Heroic organizational leadership style. The project feels under control—and if control is what is most important—then that is what this style delivers.

Unfortunately, this method has the longest project completion time. When the team knows that the contingencies are there, they won't drive quite as hard. And if a new feature comes to mind, customer-visible or not, the available contingency time can too easily allow

the team or an individual to add the feature, even if it is not in the best interest of the business.

So we have a longer time to market, less control over changes and features, and a management team that looks good. What is the business goal?

### The "Just in Time" Project

The "Just in Time" project team has a different mindset. They don't commit, they estimate. They float the end date, stay in touch with customer reality, stay loose and operate with the "project truth" exposed for all to see.

The advantages of this approach include getting to the end of the project and getting to the deliverable that meets the business needs, faster than the "just in case" approach. The downside is that it will be less predictable, and predictability is highly valued in politically charged businesses and with career-competitive staff.

But more important are the differences between the two approaches. Working in this style requires that the business leaders trust the team. The



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business leaders must take on a sponsorship-oriented, almost nurturing role. That trust has to be earned by the team by virtue of the team understanding the customer's requirements, understanding the business needs in the context of the project, and having an understanding of what they as a team can accomplish—to understanding their limitations.

### Just in Teaming

To build a winning team, you need to build the spirit, the competencies, the understanding, the communications, and the business savvy; and of course build the project planning, management, leadership, and sponsorship skills of the business and project teams. Have your project sponsors been trained on how to sponsor a project team?

So team maturity is the key to project performance. Team building is too synonymous with the Friday afternoon beer bust, the long and insight-building offsite events, the “brain dumps” from the project and business leaders. It is through all of these and none of these

that teams emerge. Team performance is built on a team that loves to work together, believes in the importance of the business mission, feels free to balance innovation with results, and is in touch with reality.

Building that kind of a team is not accomplished with “event marketing” by marching the team through a series of events, special one-up training or one-on-one meetings with consultants. It's accomplished from the inside of the team as the group gains understanding of each other and grows its own enthusiastic desire to deliver stellar business results.

The team needs a definition of winning. Meeting a schedule with missing functions or decrepit quality may get logged as a project schedule win, but it is hardly ever a business win. Having the coolest feature set, one that rocks competition, is great, but not if it misses the opportunity to lock up the biggest customers.

The tradeoffs around schedule, function and cost are too big for one Heroic

leader to make. Those decisions need the informed wisdom of the project team. A team that is fully informed, in control of the project destiny, and ready and willing to do what it takes.

BUILD A TEAM that is ready to take over the business. It's kind of like breeding race horses. The best ones always are a little out of control, have a wild look in their eye and feel a little dangerous. But it's that flirting with danger that is the sign of a winner. ■

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**Dennis Smith's** unique background includes 30 years of experience with software, electrical and mechanical engineering projects. As principal of CompanySmith, Inc., he enables businesses to shorten time-to-market, reduce costs and become product development leaders. He holds a B.S. in mechanical engineering from Purdue University and is a member of PDMA and PMI. Contact Dennis at [dms@companysmith.com](mailto:dms@companysmith.com) or visit his website at [www.companysmith.com](http://www.companysmith.com) to subscribe to his free newsletter.