

Managing Someone Else's Contract, and Cleaning up the Garbage

Written by Andrew Miller

How many of us have been brought on to manage a project where the contract for the product or service was signed just before we started? Many of us, I imagine. And how much fun is it to review the contract on your first day and realize what your client or organization has agreed to? Then it is even more fun once you realize that, as the PM, you will be responsible for managing that contract. Happy days are here to stay!!!

Well, not really. It puts the PM in quite the dilemma. Once you have reviewed the contract and other documents to "get you up to speed," if you spot a shortcoming, what do you do? No one wants to be the person identifying problems in their first week on the project ...but that is our obligation. If you realize that the scope of the contract is lacking in certain details, that issue must be raised. If you think that the timelines that were agreed to are not realistic based on the budget, then that issue must be addressed. Not having been involved in the initial negotiations and development of the statement (or scope) or work, you are left to clean up the mess. But we love to clean up the mess, don't we? That's why we became project managers, right? Sure, we love to assign and manage tasks and budgets; we love to see progress and work being done; we love giving status reports but, in the end, don't we really just love to solve problems? I know I do. But I digress...back to the contract thing.

My advice is that if you are brought on to manage a project, one of the first things you should do is read the contract (if there is one). You need to understand what has been promised, what is expected to be delivered, any penalties or incentives that are included, any service levels, etc. You also need to ensure that any concerns are brought to your project sponsor as soon as possible. My motto is that I would rather take a few bullets up front to toughen me up: but give me a chance to heal before the next set of bullets gets fired. Taking too many at once is bad for your health.

The moral of the story is...clients and companies, **please, please, please** include the PM in the contract negotiations, even as an innocent bystander. At least then they will have insight as to the motivations for some of the deliverables and service levels.

Also, when firing, please use rubber bullets. They hurt less!

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