Schedule Overruns on a Secret Spy Project

Question:

My company has recently been given a very lucrative and prestigious contract from the United States military. The project is top-secret and involves tracking the whereabouts of spies all over the world. There is a slight problem. We are trending over our deadline and this project absolutely cannot finish late. If it finishes late we might lose track of some of these people. Believe me - you don't want spies getting lost.

Can you offer any advice?

William Calhoun

PS. Please don't use my real name in your response. I could get fired for disclosing details of this project. Please just refer to me as "PMAnimal".

Answer:

William,

First of all, you should be proud of your full name. There are many distinguished Williams in the world today. Don't let anyone fire you just because of your name.

William Calhoun, the next thing I need to tell you is to relax. Projects that run behind schedule are very common. In fact, that's when I do some of my best managing! I do get a lot of practice at it anyway.

That windbag Tom Mochal (ha, ha … just kidding -not) would probably tell you the first step is to determine the cause of trending over schedule. Well let's just skip that step since these instances can almost always be blamed on incompetent staff or incompetent clients. Notice I am not saying these are the causes. I am just saying that problems can almost always be blamed on staff or clients.

The right question to ask is whether you really want to work hard enough to get the project back on schedule. If you don't, then spend all of your energy getting a deadline extension. If you really want to try to get back on schedule, let me share some of the "secrets" of the trade with you.

Overtime

Ah, the project manager's best friend - staff overtime. Yes, your team might complain if this goes on for too long, but it is a simple way to get extra work done. To keep morale soaring, make sure that whenever you see your team - whether it is at 9:30 AM on your way into the office or at 3:30 PM when you are leaving to beat the traffic – be sure you tell them that you appreciate all of their hard work.

Bolster Resources on the Critical Path

In case there are some mentally challenged readers out there, the critical path is the chain of activities on the project that has zero float and is driving the end date of the project. When you realize that your critical path is late you need to kick things up a notch. This is when I a little technique I call "critical path dynamite". I assign everyone on the entire project to work on the critical path. Don't worry about the work that goes undone. If the other stuff was important than it would be called critical too.

Fast Track

This one always reminds me of driving down the freeway in my sweet 1982 Dodge Dart. Fast tracking refers to identifying certain sequential activities and find a way to work on them partially in parallel. Let me guess, on your project, do you need the design the spy system before you will actually start coding the system? No wonder you are behind schedule – that logic is for wimps! Have the design phase and construction phases occur simultaneously! You might encounter some tangles along the way, but remember that's why God made erasers.

Zero Tolerance Scope Change – Just Say No

Sometimes, as project manager, you have to take a hard line with the client. Anything that was not specified in the original requirements is just going to have to wait. If they want a way to protect the system from hackers, you tell them NO! If they want to encrypt the name of the spies, you just say NO! You get the picture? If they want these kinds of fancy features you tell them they are going to need to give you more schedule and budget – and then pad your estimates enough to absorb any schedule and budget overruns so far.

William Calhoun, I hope this information was of value to you on your spy tracking project. Remember my motto - go out there and be competent!