

Scope Change for Dummies

Question:

I have a client that does not seem to have the time to define requirements. She runs through the requirements as quickly as possible and then during the projects she continues to send us changes since she does not like what we did the first time. This is very frustrating. How can we convince her to not send us so many changes?

Dunstan

Answer:

“Dum”stan,

Ha ha! Did you see I make joke out of your name. It is a good name since it allowed me to make a funny title for this column as well. Thanks you for this laugh.

Now, let me see if I can help you with your dilemma. It appears that you have a number of problems. First of all, it appears that the client does not respect you enough to provide all of the project requirements at one time. She must think her time is more valuable than yours. I would suggest that you attend an assertiveness class so that she does not continue to run all over you.

Second it seems like you have a hard time saying “no”. Were you a clerk of some kind before you became a project manager? Maybe you were a waiter, right? When the customer wants a steak you say okay. When they want a beer you say okay. When they want cake you say okay. It sounds like you are a good order taker. This might be good for waiters and clerks, but it is not a good technique for a project manager.

When I was younger I might have told you to just build the deliverables based on the first requirements. If you deliver something that customer does not want, perhaps the next time she will be more diligent to tell you what she wants the first time. Unfortunately I have tried this technique myself, and the result was simply that we had to do the project twice. As you know I am motivated to be as efficient as possible. I call this “work harder for fewer hours”. So having to do the same project twice ended up not being a good deal for me.

My more advanced advice now is to be a better job of managing the scope of e project. Managing scope is making sure you deliver what the customer asks and keeping track of all the times they change their mind. That way when the project takes twice as long to complete as estimated, you can go back to your handy scope change list to justify the extra time. Then you look like you know what you are doing and the client looks like a jerk for changing their mind so often.

Since I am in a good mood today, I will even give you a process you can use for scope change requests.

1. Receive a scope change request and validate it came from your client. In my company, people that are not even on the project will send in changes and hope you will do their work for them as well.
2. Write the scope change request on a three-part carbon form. Tear the sections apart and give the canary (yellow) copy to the client. You can keep the carbon paper and

sell it on the black market. This is another advantage of tracking scope changes diligently.

3. Document the reason for the scope change request. This could be something like “customer screwed up”, “great suggestion from project manager” or perhaps “customer too lazy to get the requirements right the first time”.
4. Estimate the impact to your project. The rule of thumb is to get the most accurate estimate of the extra work, cost and schedule delay. Then take that number and triple it. This provides extra padding to help absorb other delays on your project and discourages a lot of scope change requests.
5. Take this information on the cause and the impact of the scope change request to the project sponsor. The sponsor will see that the scope change is a result of client screw-up and they will see a big estimate of extra expense and delay. The sponsor will not be happy. Again, this is a powerful motivator to make sure the requirements are right the first time and that there are not very many changes.
6. If for some reason the scope change is still approved, you have no choice but to do the work – sorry. But it is good to get some scope changes approved since the extra time and cost you added to the estimate can be used to absorb other delays.

So there you have it. You see that scope change requests can be good for the client and good for the project as well. In addition you see that there are powerful incentives for the client to keep scope changes to a minimum. It is the best of everything.

Project management – I love it.