

Leadership Barometer 150 Scope Creep **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



One of the most insidious problems in any kind of project work is scope creep. Scope creep occurs when the deliverables of a project change while it is underway. The impact of scope creep is often a dissatisfied customer or a loss of profit for the vendor. Either way, the situation has caused the result to be less satisfying than expected.

How scope creep happens

It is very easy to understand how scope creep happens. Nobody can anticipate every minute detail of a project before doing the work. There are always going to be surprises that come up along the way. Here are some examples of surprises:

- unexpected delays,
- schemes that did not work as expected,
- resources being unavailable,
- new features requested by the customer,
- material shortages requiring workarounds.

These kinds of problems are common on most projects.

Recognize the changes

There is no 100% guarantee that any project is going to completion without some change in scope. The trick to managing scope creep effectively is to recognize when a change occurs. It is very easy to accommodate small or subtle changes in the specification for the project. The sum of many small changes can mean a huge difference in the success of the project.

Make sure to discuss all changes to the specification openly. That transparency will protect you at least partially. It will notify the customer of a change from the original design. You can then renegotiate the price or the delivery time in order to accommodate the change in scope.

How the customer reacts

If you are the customer, recognize that the vendor was not able to envision all of the things that might happen. In reality, changes in scope will be happening for both the vendor and the customer on every project. Life happens, and both parties are going to have to roll with the vicissitudes they are facing daily.

12 tips that can help reduce the stress of scope creep:

1. Ensure there is enough communication with the customer when creating the specifications.
2. Do not start a project with preconceived notions of what the customer really wants.
3. Have detailed and specific specifications. Any vague deliverables are going to be areas of contention down the road.
4. Factor in the potential for scope creep by building contingencies or safety factors into the bidding process.
5. Keep a ledger of requested changes on both sides. It is not necessary to renegotiate the entire deal for each change. It is important to have all changes documented.
6. Plan the job in phases with sign-off gates at specific milestones. A scope change can be confined to one phase of the project and not infect the entire effort.
7. Look for win-win solutions to problems. Often a creative solution is available that will delight both the vendor and the customer.
8. Avoid rigidity about the job. Make sure the entire project is constantly moving in the direction of a successful conclusion. If things get significantly off the track, call for a meeting to clarify the issues and brainstorm solutions together.
9. Keep the customer well informed about the progress of the project.
10. Express gratitude when the other party is willing to make a concession. Goodwill is important in every project because life is a series of projects. A poor reputation can severely hamper future income.
11. Have a formal closing to the project where each party expresses gratitude for a job well done. If there were any specific lessons learned during this job, document them. Both parties can benefit from these lessons in the future.
12. Plan an appropriate celebration at the end of a challenging project to let people feel good about what they have done and reduce the pressure.

Conclusion

The best defense for stress caused by scope creep is to bring all changes out in the open. Changes can occur on either side of the equation. Make the impact on the total delivery visible. The key objective is to avoid disappointing surprises that result from a lack of communication between various stakeholders throughout the process.

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