

Project Management Tales – Um, We Have a Technical Problem...

By *Debbie Gallagher*



Debbie Gallagher

Each story in this series of Project Management Tales is true, but company names have been changed. Some stories occurred in Canada and others took place in the US and overseas.

Background

Acme Corporation was selling a distribution system to a new customer. The customer, Standard Inc., needed the new distribution system to accommodate its new product line, which had regulatory and discounting requirements that could not be accomplished in their current system.

Standard was a high profile company, and was planning to purchase Acme's latest software release, version four, which was configurable, web-enabled and capable of integration with several industry-standard systems.

Several meetings had already taken place, and significant work had already been done on verifying Standard's requirements.

The Situation

At a meeting in May, the VP of Information Systems for Standard told Acme's sales rep and project manager that there was a new and critical requirement. The regulatory approval for the new product had been completed faster than planned, so Standard wanted Acme to implement the new system by mid-July.

Acme's new software was expected to be completed no earlier than September, after which there would be an implementation period. The software could not possibly be completed and installed by July.

Standard and Acme began to discuss the other options available to solve the timing problem. Could release three be installed instead? Version three did not meet Standard's needs for web access, reporting, and integration. In addition, version three took several weeks to implement, so it could not be completed before July.

The Acme sales rep suggested to the Acme project manager that he should push the version four delivery date earlier and guarantee Standard a September go-live date. The Acme project manager refused to guarantee an earlier completion and delivery date because he knew it was not achievable.

The Standard VP was irritated that the July 15 date was not being taken seriously.

Action Taken

The project manager asked detailed questions about immediate requirements. Although Standard wanted everything that version four had to offer, what elements could wait and what elements had to be in place in July? The VP of Standard said they could live without the flexible configuration, web access, and integration for a short time, but absolutely had to be able to meet regulatory requirements for distribution of their new product by July 15. Some discounting features were also crucial to their marketing strategy.

The project manager suggested that what Standard needed by July 15 was version one, with some customizations. Doing the custom programming for version one would delay the release of version four, as the same programmers would be used.

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The VP at Standard thought this was an acceptable interim solution. However, the Acme sales rep said there were some technical issues that would be problematic. She and the project manager retreated to another room to make phone calls to the Acme technical staff.

As soon as they closed the door to the other room, the Acme sales rep let the project manager know that she was very angry. This was a terrible solution, as the sale for version four would not fall in the current year's revenue, nor would her commission. There was no license fee for version one, so the only revenue would be for the custom programming and implementation fees. The phone calls made were not to technical staff but to the Sales VP and Executive VP at Acme.

The project manager was on the receiving end of irate comments from the sales rep, the Sales VP, and the Executive VP.

They really wanted the version four revenue booked this year. They felt that if they pushed hard enough, they could convince Standard to accept the September delivery date for version four, allowing the version four sale to occur in the current year. Then, when the software was not ready, Standard would have no choice but to accept the delays.

Epilogue

Acme did customize version one and install it at Standard by July 15. Although version one did not have much functionality and was inflexible, it was able to do the basics that Standard needed.

Standard was very pleased with Acme for coming up with a solution to the timing problem. They operated version one until March, when Acme implemented version four of the software at Standard.

Conclusion

Sometimes the project manager has to stand up to members of his own team to deliver what the customer really needs. The project manager came up with a recommendation with the customer's best interests in mind, but took a lot of heat from his own organization for the delayed revenue. However, the early delivery allowed Standard to start selling its product, so the effort was appreciated. Standard became a high-profile, very satisfied customer reference for Acme.

In order to figure out how to solve the customer's timing problem, the project manager had to re-visit the customer's requirements. This additional analysis was the key to determining how to solve the customer's problem. T G

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