

WHAT'S THE REAL QUESTION?

Graham Oakes exposes the problems in agreeing development project deadlines.



Graham Oakes: it's about negotiating deadlines

Have you ever been in a conversation like the following?

Manager: "How long will it take to build system X?"

Developer: "About nine months."

Manager (threatening): "We need it in four."

Developer (defensive): "We'll do the best we can."

In this scenario, did the system get delivered to the 'agreed' deadline and to acceptable quality levels?

The problem lies in the initial question. The manager is asking for an estimate, but they probably have two quite different things in mind:

1. A deadline. The manager already knows when they want the system. They're just checking whether this is feasible.
2. A commitment. The manager probably believes that teams do better work when they feel a sense of control. By asking for an estimate, they're trying to give an impression that the team has control and so can choose to commit to the deadline.

If the developer had answered "About four months", then everything would have been fine – the estimate, deadline and commitment would all line up. Because the developer estimated nine months, the tone of the conversation changed.

In reality, this discussion was never about estimating. It was about negotiating deadlines. And because the developer focused on giving an estimate, they lost the negotiation.

If the manager had asked "What can be built in four months?", then the discussion might have gone very differently. The deadline is out in the open and people can talk about it sensibly.

Failing that, there are several things the developer could do to get the conversation back on track:

- They could clarify what question is being asked: is this about estimates or deadlines? They could do this by asking questions such as "Is there any date you need it by?" or "Is there any aspect of the system that you need especially urgently?"
- They could back their estimates with data. If the last three systems like X all took nine months to build, then why will X be built any faster? This lessens the power gap in the negotiation – the developer has power because they have data.
- They could watch for hidden negotiations. When they recognise a negotiation, they can start to look for trade-offs: could we reduce scope or increase the resources available, for example, in order to hit the deadline?

What the developer actually did, however, was concede defeat.

Of course, "We'll do the best we can" isn't a commitment to hit the deadline. It's a sign that the developer has given up. It could even be a sign of passive resistance. A smart manager would have recognised this and switched the conversation to a more positive tone, trying to clarify whether the deadline really was feasible.

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