

Is That Seismic Shift Your Schedule Slipping?



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You have a product development process. You get different functions involved. You produce product development plans. But the schedules move just one way—out.

Leading a project is often like living in an earthquake fault zone. The pressure builds and builds underneath until there's a potentially disastrous slippage that shakes the schedule up. Sometimes the schedule movement is dramatic, altering the product's business landscape by missing launch windows, losing business and delaying follow-on products. Pressure is sometimes relieved with small slips that prevent "the big one," but it all adds up to projects that are late.

When a project slip is about to occur, there is usually a flurry of activity trying to delay or push back on the inevitable. Picture the futility of concerned seismologists and heavy-equipment operators at the fault line trying to hold back the quake. The objective should not be to hold back the slips; they are the unavoidable result of built-up pressures. The focus should be on preventing the pressure buildup in the first place.

There are a number of ways to prevent pressure buildup listed below. At the top of the list are suggestions to those who manage at the portfolio and overall organizational level. The list evolves to include items that can be successfully implemented more locally. By the bottom you will find several high-impact areas that can be worked effectively at the project level.

1. Don't Play Portfolio Dominoes

Often the pressure is built up before you've even gotten out of the starting blocks. Resources are tied up on another project so you can only get some of the team started. Not staffing for success is an insidious problem; you are making some progress and it seems like there's still plenty of time to catch up. We know that's a trap. At the portfolio level, the dominoes just keep falling—impacting project after project. If this sounds familiar, it's time to break the cycle. Your plans need to reflect reality. If you have several projects going that are understaffed, you would be better served by executing fewer while staffing them each for success. Not only will the projects you execute complete more quickly, over time the throughput of your pipeline will be higher.

2. Make Organization a Choice

We can also create pressure by how we choose to organize to get things done. Most organizations are functionally aligned for very good reasons, most of which our customers don't care about. If you optimized your structure for customer solutions instead of ease of internal management, how would the structure change? We often try to have it both ways with "the matrix". We do the best we can, given both the internal and customer solution goals. Think about whether you view the organizational structure as a constraint (something your people and processes must

overcome) or an advantage (something that helps you do things that matter to your customers). What parts or services can you buy or partner for instead of make? Complex organizations that extend across geographies and include partners can be challenging. Think about co-locating. That has been proven to raise the performance of teams. If you must be dispersed, your interfaces may need to reflect the geography so do it cleanly and minimize interdependencies. Ask questions that may go counter to the existing organizational structure. What functions should be more integrated to go fast? Clarify who gives project direction, functional managers or project managers. Begin with the end in mind. Think about how effective system integration will be before you finish the architecture. Design the project's organizational interfaces with speed in mind. Interfaces matter from architecture to intra-company hand-offs to decision making management structure. Making these thoughtful, explicit choices can prevent you from being slowed down.

3. Reduce the Overhead of Project Oversight

When development teams need to update senior management, project work can nearly stop because of the overhead required for these updates. Senior management oversight is important and information is needed to provide that oversight knowledgeably. However, think about what is really needed—this might be much less than what is being provided. For instance, refocusing on exceptions more than status may cut down on busy work. If management keeps finding project management gaps, then they need to address that problem by finding the right staff, not by managing the projects themselves. They should play the role of Project Portfolio “Board of Directors,” not “Grand Inquisitor.”

4. Don't Slice the Bologna Too Thin

One of the common ways to cover all of those projects with limited staff is to have many people multitask. Often, the organizational culture expects it. Some service functions and management roles within a development organization are optimized to operate this way. Unfortunately, the overwhelming consensus of those who have actually studied this is that for tasks requiring any substantial mental energy people lose some effectiveness by time-slicing on two things and a majority of their effectiveness when working on three or more. The pressures that this creates on a project are often gradual but unmistakable. If extreme multitasking is a cultural norm, start creating new heroes from those who focus and get the job done time after time and start aligning folks more toward customer solutions rather than the fun of working on lot's of different stuff. If it's a true resource constraint problem, either work on fewer and do them faster or start creating some on-demand resource flexibility by partnering with people outside of your walls to create a buffer in your capacity. To do that, start redefining the role of function managers more broadly than just managing their own people, rather managing a flexible capacity to get that functional work done with internal or external resources as needed.

5. Learn from the Outside

We can learn a lot from others. Every firm has its unique set of people, opportunities, and challenges. But extracting “best practices” from others in industry can provide you with a great advantage over those who stay under their insulation blanket, thinking they’re too different and/or too busy to learn from others. Getting help or investing to understand the best practices of other organizations is a sign of confidence, wisdom and maturity—not weakness. People are put in leadership positions for what they can accomplish, not to limit potential based on what they happen to know or how many waking hours they can work. A wonderful pressure reducer is to shamelessly borrow from others who have already figured it out and then modify it for your own needs. The knowledge outside your walls is almost limitless, so why constrain yourself?

6. Learn from the Inside

As George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". If you don't realize where those same pressures have been coming from, how can you prevent them? People can learn to avoid making the same mistakes. With groups or organizations, collective learning is much more difficult. Here are a couple of suggestions to help make the collective organization smarter. First, if you have multiple project leaders, make sure they spend time together with the explicitly goal of learning from each other's experiences. It's much easier to teach a few key people than an entire organization. Second, if you don't do any project debriefs or retrospectives, start. You don't have to wait until the end to figure out how you might plan some things differently next time. Debriefs are best done early and often while memories are fresh and the learning can still be applied on that project. Encourage groups to figure out what should have been done differently as well as what really worked out well. Find easy ways of recording these “lessons learned” so that others can benefit from the experiences as well. Push information and archive it in a wiki or create an easily accessible book of knowledge.

7. Provide Teams with Great Leaders

The single greatest leverage point in a product development system is project (or program - depending on your terms) management excellence. Without high-caliber project leadership, pressures can build up from any and all directions. The right leadership can avoid those unseen pressures by helping to build a team; create the right process; keep people focused on the mission; avoid or mitigate the risks; change direction when needed; and drive people to accomplish what the business needs and the customer wants. Process certification and management tools are helpful, but always keep in mind the simple reality that project leadership is people leadership.

8. Develop Great Teams as a Secret Weapon

If you were driving a complex product development project (with all of its dynamic challenges and unknowns), and you had a choice between having the best process or the best team, which would you choose? The cliché “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts” is true when it comes to real teams. No matter how good the

process, a weak team won't be able to execute a complex recipe well in a dynamic environment. In that case the pressures build up from the process as well as the inability to make good decisions, get buy-in or react well to change. A great team will be able to figure out how to get it done, ensure that things don't fall through the cracks, pick up each other's slack, and do whatever else it takes to succeed. If you're involved with complex, dynamic development efforts, the "secret weapon" is getting your people to work together toward a common goal. This alignment and cooperation pays off much more quickly than process refinement. Process can be important, but teams are imperative.

9. Get More Concurrent

We've all experienced the pressures that come with the last-minute snags and early production and service snafus. The show-stopping bug, the engineering release package that doesn't yield well in production, the early customer feedback indicating that something missed the mark, or the customer support organization that wasn't ready to take the first calls all create urgent situations that we must react to in order to save the day. Typically, these situations are internally created—and internally preventable. The remedy is true, concurrent product development with quality checks concurrent with the design, manufacturing and customer service input from definition through development, and with customer feedback early and often. Of course this is nothing new; but too often we pay the price for not doing it.

10. Overlap Your Product Development Phases

A structured product development process can put a great deal of unnecessary pressure on a project by artificially inserting stop lights. Hard gates that stop projects dead while waiting for approval waste time and kill momentum. Encourage parallelism by continuing the work through stage gates while defining some limits on how far to go. Ensure that senior management has timely meetings and decisions. The product development team should not have to make up for wait time.

11. Don't Pour Cement on Risky Guesses

We often add unnecessary pressure by rigidly baking early guesses into our architectures and designs—all in the name of speed. You specify, then design. But if you don't know, you can't wait forever to specify, so you make a choice and move forward. If you learn later that it wasn't a great choice, you rework with the predictable schedule impacts. Think about another way of doing this. Software developers using agile methods take a different path where capabilities are built up over time and feedback and iterative design get you to a finished product effectively and efficiently. For those who can't iterate rapidly as software allows, you may still be able to specify, architect, design, and develop certain areas of your product to include flexibility for late changes (much like holding off writing the newspaper headline while much of the other content is already fixed; the newspaper publishing system is designed to allow this flexibility). Manage the project knowing you need to make a decision when you have the confidence to make it (and before, as Preston Smith calls it, the "Last Responsible Moment" that the project schedule will allow).

12. Track the NEOs

Sometimes external pressures are dramatic and instantaneous. They can seem like asteroids striking the earth with little warning. Tracking NEOs (Near Earth Objects) makes sure that we aren't blind-sided. Similarly, with projects, active risk management that includes both avoidance and mitigation strategies is essential. You should never be completely surprised by something big and schedule-busting. By managing actively, you will avoid many risks. When you can't avoid, mitigate. Even when things appear dire, by being proactive you can still try sending Bruce Willis up to nuke that asteroid. If you are being surprised with any frequency you need to focus on improving your risk management capability.

13. Ensure There's a Collective Sense of Urgency

Not everything can be at the top of a priority list and it really irritates people when management fuels pressures by disingenuously creating fire-drills. But there are times when there is a business imperative to get something done more quickly. People are very good at rallying when needed. Explain why it's needed. Connect the dots for everyone working on the project from the customer to your cubicles. Figure out the cost of delay for each day to help make quick tradeoff decisions. Make sure that team members are not just giving it a good effort; ensure that there is personal commitment to make it happen. People often confuse goals and commitments—they are worlds apart in effort and results.

Thinking about these thirteen pressure prevention areas can be great start to alleviating the preventable forces of schedule slip pressure. Determine which of them represents your biggest opportunities at both the portfolio level and the project level, and you may be able to spend much less energy on Richter scale readings and much more on leading successful projects and managing the growth of your business.