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## Here Are Your Three Key Questions

By: Ken Hanley (23 Mar 2001)

I saw it again this week on a big, multi-million dollar custom systems development project in the States, and I see it time and time again - the focusing and alignment power contained in three key questions that should be asked and answered, no, must be asked and answered, at the beginning of any project, no matter how big, no matter how small.

Sounds a bit like Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who, doesn't it?

And I do mean any project. This time I happened to see the three key questions used this time to focus the work of a large development team (nearly one hundred technical staff), the project stakeholders, and the project sponsor.

I know I've talked about this before, but it's powerful stuff that bears repeating.

The three key questions represent one of those simple concepts you should be using on every project, what Dr. Francis Hartman (the man who came up with them in the first place) would call an IDAHO, or "I'd do it at home" concept.

Much of Dr. Hartman's project management wit and wisdom (good stuff like the three key questions) is incorporated in his excellent book, published by the Project Management Institute. The book is called Don't Park Your Brain Outside, and it's an excellent book despite the dumb title. I've always told Francis it should have been called Four Projects and a Funeral. Maybe next time.

But I digress. We're all carrying project battle scars, we've all learned that we need alignment among all players on the key measures of success for a project, and that we've got to ensure that everyone involved has the same understandings.

Here's how.

The three key questions: they're so fundamental that I'd argue that if you don't have clear and definitive answers to all three before you start your project, you're in for a world of hurt.

1. At what point do we agree that this project is done?

Ever been on a project where any number of people disagreed on the project's end point? Think about a big ERP implementation - what's done for a project like that? Successfully processing one month-end of financials? One quarter? Through a year end? When you've got the culture change that the CEO always talks about? By the way, how would you measure that?

Can you see the trouble we're going to run into if we don't get agreement on the end point? Ever been on a project where one constituency says "We're done, we want to be paid/bonused/whatever," and another says "You're not done as far as I'm concerned, you're not done until..."

Wouldn't it be better to agree on done before we get started?

Let's say my project is driving to Vancouver from Calgary. And we'll agree that I'm done when I reach the Vancouver city limits. Objective, definitive and unarguable, you're there or you aren't - my kind of done.

But even with a clear definition of done, let's acknowledge that we can be done, and still fail on a project.

That where the second question comes in. 2. At the point where we've agreed we're done, how will we know that we've won? Here's where we're looking for the project's objective measures of success, our key performance indicators.

I remember being three months and hundreds of thousands of dollars into a project I was leading a few years back when I asked the project sponsor, Merv, the vice-president of marketing: "How will you know that we've succeeded with this project?" His answer wasn't helpful: "When what you build is better than the one we've got now."

This one was my fault. I should have asked at the beginning and got definitive measures then. "When my customers are happy" isn't a satisfactory measure, unless you add a metric. "When we've reduced average call handling time from 170 to 90 seconds, reduced dropped calls from seven per cent to three per cent or less, and cut call center staff numbers by 15 per cent" works - everyone knows what to gun for.

For the trip to Vancouver, measures of won might be:

If we get there (to our done) using less than four tanks of gas and

in less than 14 hours from when we started, and the two kids in the back seat haven't killed each other.

Clear, objective and unarguable, just the way I like 'em.

3. Who gets to make the call on questions 1 and 2? This is usually the project sponsor, and usually the person who's backside is on the line for the success of the project.

I want to know what I need to do and who'll be passing judgment before I get started - not an unreasonable request.

For the Vancouver trip, the who might be my spouse, she'll decide on the done and won. If I've done this right, I'll have put my project sponsor/spouse in the position of having to come absolutely clean on these questions before I even leave the garage in Calgary.

And we'll tell the project sponsors that once they've signed off on the done, won and who that they can indeed change their answers, but that of course nothing comes for free. We can make changes, but since any changed answers will represent a change from the (agreed to, signed) done, won and who baseline, there will be impacts: an increase in project cost and/or an extension in project duration and/or a compromise in project performance. No emotions here. Just the facts.

Done, won and who: for the project you're working on, do you have definitive answers to the three key questions and would everyone involved in the project agree? Can you see trouble ahead if they don't?

Next time: Project check points. Not just "How do we know we've won" but "How will we know we're winning?"

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