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The SC Addiction

By James Brown, PhD

I was in Nashville Tennessee recently checking on a loved one at the hospital. Behind the parking garage's row of elevators was a woman smoking in the 27 F weather while the ice cold wind whistled through the garage. Smoking is not allowed anywhere on this hospital's property and this smoker was not only in violation of that policy, but she was a patient at the hospital, dressed only in a patient robe and was hooked up to a portable IV pole she had dragged down from her hospital room.

This behavior did not surprise me because my uncle, a brilliant man with a Masters degree from a prestigious university, set his beard on fire smoking a cigarette while hooked to an oxygen tank. He needed the oxygen tank because he had emphysema from smoking cigarettes! So I know the power of the addiction from smoking cigarettes (SC). The SC addiction!

There is a SC addiction in project management!

That SC addiction in project management is Scope Creep (SC). Scope Creep being defined as a non-mandatory change in scope. Some individuals and some organizations are as addicted to Scope Creep as individuals are addicted to cigarettes. In both cases these addicts are good people. They are smart people. But they are people with an addiction. They have sincere and noble intentions to quit, but their addiction results in behavior that is not logical.

Many organizations have suffered project cost overruns, schedule delays and even project failure due to Scope Creep. In Tom Kendrick's book *Identifying and Managing Project Risk* he states "Scope risks are the most numerous in the Project Experience Risk Information Library (PERIL) database..." and "...scope creep changes were the most damaging on average."

The Data Says Scope Creep Kills!

Often the organization agrees Scope Creep is a big problem. After lessons learned reviews the organization usually states we will not travel down this painful road again. Yet it happens again because they are Scope Creep addicts. They set their own beard on fire! Addicts will do it even when they know the behavior is damaging to them and others. We all know and can agree that Scope Creep is damaging but...

Can We Really Stop Increasing Scope?

Just like a smoking addict will sneak cigarettes, you will have stakeholders and customers trying to sneak in changes to the project. They can be very conniving and sneaky. As project manager you should never be surprised at the lengths people will go to get their change in. You must realize you are not dealing with rational people, but dealing with addicts. Here are some common characteristics of addicts you should be aware of with regard to controlling Scope Creep on your project and dealing with stakeholders.

1. The stakeholder will have withdrawal symptoms when they stop engaging in Scope Creep. These withdrawal symptoms will result in them being a.) irritable (always pointing out the negatives about the project), or b.) restless (being overly concerned about the project status or trivial items) or c.) depressed (this project will be the death of us). *Or a trifecta of all three.* So if you are controlling scope, do not expect your stakeholders to be happy and if they have been used to adding changes whenever their heart desired expect them to have a deep seeded hate for you. Remember your primary job as project manager is not to be liked but to deliver while being respected.

2. The stakeholder will constantly focus on the change(s) they want. Seemingly every meeting, every email, every form of communication may have some reference to their needed change. You can be having a project discussion about an unrelated item and somehow their desired change(s) comes up. *They can't let it go.*

3. One change does not satisfy the stakeholder. Even if you relent and let their supposed critical change in...soon after they will have another. They always want another regardless of what phase of the project you are currently in. They only see their need for the change. The big picture is irrelevant to them because of their addiction.

4. The stakeholder will deny their behavior is the problem. They will point out all kinds of other reasons the project may be in trouble including your performance as project manager. Their change(s) never cause or contribute to the problem.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak!

This is true when it comes to Scope Creep. If we are going to be able to overcome the SC addiction we must be honest with ourselves about the problem and its impacts. Additionally, the organization will have to commit to overcome the intense discomforts, pain and withdrawal symptoms of not engaging in this practice.

If you have attended one of my training classes you know I always state “*Nothing comes for free and there is no such thing as a free lunch.*” With regard to managing scope...

- You can allow changes all the way through the project... but a price will be paid.

or

- You can baseline the scope and not allow any changes until after project completion... but a price will be paid.

These are the two extreme points when it comes to managing scope and as a project manager you must strike a balance between these two extreme points. There is more than one right way to do this and beware of any consultant or methodology that espouses their proposal is the only right way. Each right way has benefits and baggage and your responsibility is to know both and *use judgment* to make a conscious decision to accept the benefits and baggage based on the chosen course of action... ***Just don't set your beard on fire!***

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Dr. James T. Brown, president of SEBA[®] Solutions Inc., a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute, has provided training and consulting services for dozens of companies nationally and internationally. SEBA[®]

Solutions also provides OnePdu.com <http://OnePdu.com> for online project management training. A recognized authority in project management, Dr. Brown is a frequently invited speaker on project management areas of interest. He is the author of ***The Handbook of Program Management*** published by McGraw Hill and is a member of the Project Management Institute, the National Speakers Association and the National Association of Corporate Directors. Dr. Brown has a patent for a project scheduling methodology, and has received numerous awards including "*Engineer of the Year*" from the Cape Canaveral Technical Societies and is a recipient of the "*NASA Public Service Medal*" for exceptional contributions to NASA's mission. He has a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from the University of Central Florida, a MS in Engineering Management from Florida Institute of Technology and a BS in Electrical Engineering from Tennessee State University. He is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE), a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a certified speaking professional (CSP). To learn more about SEBA[®] visit www.SebaSolutions.com. You can contact James directly at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com.