

THE PLUMBER'S SECRET

By John M. Ward, O.L.S., O.L.I.P.

Among contractors, Brad the plumber was a local celebrity and for good reason.

Despite prior knowledge about his reputation for extracting extra cash, despite explicit declarations that the price was fixed and that the project had no room for extras, contractors invariably agreed to scope increases, paid Brad more and left the project feeling good about it.

Retail guru and Walmart founder, Sam Walton, used to say that one key to success is to watch what competitors do right! I tried watching Brad, even asked him once directly how he did it. He just grinned, shook his grey head and said, "Sorry; plumber's secret".

Years later, a professional project manager let me in on the secret. "Brad", my friend pointed out, "was a master of the most basic project management technique; scope control." "From what you have told me", he went on, "Brad always broke down his work into small modular deliverables and explained very clearly how each contributed to the desired end result. He also pointed out the risks of neglecting the items that had been left outside of the predefined scope. He ensured that you understood the work breakdown and the cost of each of the modules and how they contributed to the total fee. Through clear 'scope' communication he had transferred responsibility for any increases in scope and costs, directly to you. He may have very artfully induced you to approve the changes, i.e. you can keep the old cast pipe if you don't mind sewer gas, but he never crossed the line. He never decided for you. He was careful never to change the scope or increase the fee until you did. The result was a longer time line and extra charges but they were all justified and approved by the client."

I wasn't totally convinced, "Scope is too simple." I countered; "What about other more challenging project knowledge areas like scheduling, cost control, expectation management, risk management, communication and quality control?"

"They all matter," he responded; "But for smaller projects, control of scope delivers most of them. If you are clear about your scope you are communicating and when you resist scope creep and leakage by staying away from the work that's outside the scope you are on time and on the money. If you are also paid enough to do quality work, risk is minimized. Being clear about the scope of a project is a good communication plan, and long term, quality work just isn't possible without quality compensation. Through good communication and control of a project's

scope, risk is minimised and reward through enhanced compensation results."

Think about golf. The point of the game is simple; just drive a ball towards a flag and put it in the cup in as few strokes as possible. The game is basically the same for everybody but the scope differs depending on what they are playing for. Some play to get exercise and make friends; others to get practice, make money and go pro. If you scope for all of these, what are your chances of success? To succeed you have to focus your goal and then set your scope to fit it. You have to say yes to the style of game that fits your goal and no to the others that don't. You soon discover that specific project objectives and defined scope lead to clear priorities.

Is the object of the game physical exercise, competition or socialization? Knowing the game plan, i.e. scope, enables you to win because you make choices and decisions that fit your plan. Scope management may not be able to make the game any easier but it can place you closer to the centre and in better control of the processes that lead to the desired results."

I was convinced. The only question left was the tough one; what's next? How do I start to make the plumber's secret pay?

1. Give work in progress a project health check for 'scope'.

○ Symptoms:

- How is the scope plan fitting the "in progress" actuals?
- Are scope requirements either seeping away (with the profits) or creeping up (with more work for less\$)?
- Are there different expectations or confusion about critical objectives, deliverables or what is out of scope? Is there more work or are there more changes than were expected?
- Are scope items focused on the key deliverables? Are resources aligned with the key deliverables?
- Do all team members and stakeholders understand which deliverables are out of scope and which in scope items are mission critical?
- Will the projected results fit the initial scope and objectives?

2. Track the number of significant changes and related charges (anything extra we do that was not initially expected) for completed projects.

3. Articulate and break down the business objectives and scope of all key services. No matter how familiar the work is, try to challenge assumptions and ensure that the scopes are detailed, clear and fully understood.
4. Ensure that the project team, clients and stakeholders agree on procedures to make scope changes and payment approval on site.
5. Decide when and how to monitor the change control process and determine if it is being followed and if so, if it is being fully effective.
6. Review old work for lessons learned and best scope management practices. We may be surprised at how much we can learn just from watching ourselves doing something right!



John Ward is Head of Geomatics, Eastern Region for the Ontario Ministry of Transportation. He can be reached by email at: john.ward@mto.gov.on.ca.