

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I'm Expected to Deliver Results, but Nobody Added People, Budget, or a Miracle

How to Negotiate Scope, Resources, and Deadlines When Expectations Grow Faster Than Your Team's Capacity, Without Saving the Project by Working Through the Night



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

At 4:38 on a Thursday afternoon, the operations director announces that the company will launch its new express delivery service in six weeks. Marketing has already booked the advertising campaign. Sales has promised the service to several important customers. Finance has confirmed that the budget will remain unchanged, and HR has explained that hiring additional staff is currently out of the question. You are responsible for making everything happen. When you mention that your team is already fully occupied, the director smiles and says, "That's why we need strong leadership." Apparently, leadership has recently become a substitute for delivery drivers, software developers, customer support agents, and the occasional functioning vehicle. Nobody has explained how this remarkable conversion works, but you suspect it involves canceling your weekend.

The meeting ends with enthusiastic agreement. Everyone is excited about the opportunity, particularly those who will not be responsible for executing it. You return to your desk with an ambitious deadline, several new obligations, and exactly the same number of people you had that morning. Your calendar looks like a game of Tetris played by someone who has never seen a square. There are tasks to assign, suppliers to contact, systems to configure, and existing commitments that stubbornly refuse to disappear. You know the plan doesn't add up, but you also know that simply announcing "We can't do this" isn't likely to improve your professional reputation. So you reach for the familiar response: "We'll find a way." Congratulations. You've just accepted responsibility for a solution that nobody has established actually exists.

If this sounds familiar, you probably know how easily ambitious organizations confuse determination with capacity. A senior executive sets a challenging target, someone promises a customer an impressive delivery date, and the people responsible for implementation are expected to close the gap through efficiency, creativity, and exceptional commitment. These qualities matter, of course. A capable team can improve processes, eliminate unnecessary work, and accomplish things that initially seem difficult. But there is a difference between discovering a better way to operate and pretending that physical limitations are optional. Ten hours of necessary work do not automatically fit into five available hours because the project has been described as strategically important. A missing specialist does not materialize when management requests greater ownership. And a supplier's production schedule remains inconveniently resistant to motivational speeches.

The problem becomes particularly dangerous when your team manages to succeed anyway. Perhaps everyone works late for two weeks. Perhaps a colleague postpones planned leave, you personally finish tasks that should have been distributed elsewhere, and quality checks are squeezed into whatever time remains. Somehow, the launch happens. Customers are satisfied, senior management celebrates, and the final report proudly announces that the project was delivered with existing resources. What the report doesn't explain is that those resources included evenings, exhausted employees, neglected responsibilities, and a remarkable amount of personal goodwill. Next time, management may reasonably assume that the same performance is repeatable. After all, the evidence suggests that the capacity

was there all along. Your extraordinary effort has quietly become the organization's new definition of ordinary.

This is where responsibility can turn into a remarkably sophisticated trap. You want to be dependable. You care about your team's reputation, your customers, and the commitments attached to your position. You may also worry that questioning expectations will make you appear negative or incapable of handling pressure. The more senior your role, the stronger that feeling can become. Nobody wants to be the manager who responds to every ambitious proposal with a lecture about limited resources. But the opposite extreme is hardly better. When you accept every commitment before examining the conditions, you're not demonstrating confidence. You're transferring uncertainty into your own future, where it will eventually arrive disguised as an urgent problem, usually when you have something else planned.

There is another complication: not everyone placing demands on your team is being unreasonable. A customer may have a genuine commercial deadline. Your director may be facing commitments that you haven't been told about. Finance may have legitimate reasons for restricting spending, while other departments are struggling with equally serious demands. Sometimes the team itself has inefficient habits, unclear responsibilities, or processes that deserve improvement. It would be comforting to divide every difficult project into sensible employees and unreasonable executives, but actual organizations rarely offer such convenient casting. Different people often see different parts of the same problem. The challenge is to bring those realities together before enthusiasm turns into a promise that nobody can reliably fulfill.

That requires a change in how you approach difficult conversations. Instead of treating resource constraints as embarrassing objections, learn to present them as information necessary for making responsible decisions. When a deadline becomes tighter, determine what would need to change to preserve it. When the scope expands, establish what additional work that expansion creates. When a new budget is refused, explain which results remain achievable and which are exposed to greater risk. These conversations become more productive when they offer choices rather than accusations. "Your expectations are ridiculous" might be emotionally satisfying for approximately four seconds. "We can meet the date with a smaller initial release, or maintain the full scope with additional implementation time" gives everyone something useful to evaluate.

You'll also need to recognize the limits of your own influence. You can improve coordination, support employees, challenge weak assumptions, and make better use of available capacity. You cannot personally approve every budget, control every external partner, or guarantee that unexpected problems will never occur. Good management involves knowing which decisions belong to you, which require cooperation, and which must be made by someone with broader authority. Accepting accountability doesn't mean volunteering to become the emergency replacement for every missing resource. It means managing your responsibilities carefully while making the consequences of decisions visible to the people entitled to make them.

Throughout this book, we'll explore how projects accumulate hidden obligations, why apparently

straightforward schedules become impossible, and how organizations accidentally reward the very behaviors that keep their problems alive. You'll learn practical ways to negotiate scope, resources, deadlines, and priorities without turning every disagreement into a confrontation. We'll examine what to do when colleagues won't make necessary decisions, when reports conceal rather than reveal trouble, and when a project has already gone wrong. Just as importantly, we'll look at how to build a team that can operate without constantly depending on your personal intervention. The aim is not to make work effortless. It's to make demanding work more deliberate, sustainable, and honest about its costs.

Some situations won't have a satisfying solution. A deadline may genuinely be fixed. Additional funding may genuinely be unavailable. Important stakeholders may reject reasonable compromises, and an organization may continue making decisions that create unnecessary pressure. No collection of clever phrases can guarantee that every executive will listen or every negotiation will succeed. There will be occasions when you must document serious risks, seek an appropriate decision, adjust expectations, or acknowledge that a particular commitment cannot responsibly be confirmed. That isn't evidence of weak leadership. A manager who can distinguish a challenging objective from an unsupported promise is providing something far more valuable than another optimistic progress update.

For now, consider one small but important question: when you say, "We'll deliver," what exactly are you promising? Are you committing to a result supported by a credible plan, or expressing your willingness to absorb whatever

consequences the plan has failed to account for? The difference is easy to overlook when everyone wants an immediate answer. Yet that distinction shapes your workload, your team's confidence, the quality of your decisions, and ultimately your ability to deliver results repeatedly rather than through occasional acts of professional self-sacrifice.

You don't need to become cynical, inflexible, or allergic to ambitious targets. You can remain committed, resourceful, and demanding while refusing to treat unlimited personal availability as an essential management skill. Results matter. So do the conditions required to produce them, the people responsible for the work, and the life waiting for you after your working day ends. The goal is to build a way of managing in which success comes from clear decisions and realistic commitments, not from discovering how many consecutive evenings one human being can surrender to a spreadsheet.

And if someone still insists that the project requires a miracle, you can politely ask who has the authority to approve one. At the very least, miracles deserve their own budget line.

Chapter 1 - What Exactly Did You Just Agree to Deliver?

The meeting lasted twenty-three minutes, and by the end of it, everyone was delighted. A regional fitness company had approved the launch of a new membership app. The operations director wanted fewer queues at reception. Marketing wanted a modern digital experience. Finance expected lower administrative costs. The sales team imagined thousands of customers signing up without speaking to an employee. Oliver, the project manager, agreed that the app could be ready in eight weeks. There were smiles, congratulations, and a particularly enthusiastic comment about moving the business into the future. Unfortunately, nobody had asked what "ready" actually meant. Oliver believed he was delivering a functioning application. Marketing expected a complete customer journey. Finance anticipated measurable savings. Operations assumed reception staff would already know how to handle every possible problem. The company had successfully approved four different outcomes while paying for one project. An impressive achievement, although probably not the kind its shareholders were hoping for.

This is one of the most expensive misunderstandings in management: people agree on a project name and assume they have agreed on the result. Words such as launch, implement, improve, complete, and deliver sound reassuringly specific. They suggest movement toward a recognizable finish line. Yet they can conceal wildly different expectations. When a director says, "We need the new process operational by November," one person hears that

the software must be installed. Another assumes every employee will be trained. A third expects customers to be using it successfully. All three interpretations are reasonable, but they require different activities, resources, and amounts of time. The disagreement remains invisible because everyone is initially pleased with the apparent consensus. It only becomes obvious when someone announces that the project is finished and somebody else responds, "Excellent. When are you going to complete the rest of it?"

A target is not the same thing as a deliverable, and neither is automatically a business outcome. A target expresses what the organization hopes to achieve. A deliverable is something the team must produce or make available. A business outcome describes the change that the organization expects after that deliverable is used. The distinction matters because different people control different parts of the chain. Oliver's team might build an app that correctly displays memberships and processes renewals. Whether customers choose to use it could depend on pricing, communication, incentives, and the quality of the existing service. Promising to deliver the app is one commitment. Promising that it will immediately reduce staffing costs is another. Neither should be confused with a vague declaration that the project will be a tremendous success, especially when the definition of tremendous is scheduled for discussion after launch.

Before accepting a major commitment, establish what success would look like to an independent observer. Imagine someone arriving on the proposed completion date with no knowledge of the earlier meetings. What would they need to see, test, or verify before agreeing that the work was finished? For Oliver's project, an answer might include

customers being able to create an account, select an available membership, complete a payment, and receive confirmation. The application might also need to communicate correctly with the company's existing membership database. Those requirements describe observable behavior. "A seamless digital experience" describes an aspiration, which is perfectly suitable for a marketing presentation but considerably less useful when a developer asks which function must work by Friday afternoon.

A practical definition of completion also identifies who has the authority to accept the result. This can prevent an astonishing amount of unnecessary disagreement. Perhaps the technology manager must confirm that the system meets technical requirements, while operations verifies that employees can support customers. Finance might need to approve the way transactions are reconciled. If those approvals are necessary, they belong in the understanding of completion from the beginning. Otherwise, the team can finish development on Tuesday and discover on Wednesday that three additional departments have opinions requiring another fortnight of work. An acceptance process does not need to resemble an international treaty. For a modest project, a short agreement identifying the required checks and responsible people may be enough. What matters is that acceptance is based on understood conditions rather than somebody's emotional reaction to the demonstration.

The next difficulty is separating what belongs to the project from everything people would eventually like the project to contain. During an early planning conversation, someone might mention that the app could also recommend fitness classes, display personalized nutrition content, and

integrate with wearable devices. These ideas may be excellent. They do not automatically belong to the first release. Oliver needs to establish whether they are approved requirements, possible future developments, or suggestions awaiting a business decision. Otherwise, an innocent conversation about long-term possibilities can quietly become a collection of immediate obligations. The difference between "we might add this someday" and "this must be delivered in eight weeks" is considerable, even though both sentences may be accompanied by exactly the same encouraging nod.

There is also the question of conditions. An ambitious result might be achievable if certain inputs arrive on time, specialist support is available, and necessary decisions are made promptly. Those conditions should not remain private assumptions inside the project manager's head. Suppose the application requires access to membership data maintained by an external software provider. Oliver can organize his developers, prepare specifications, and request the integration. He cannot guarantee that the provider will grant access on the requested date unless this has been appropriately confirmed. If the dependency is critical, the plan should identify it and explain what happens if it remains unresolved. This is not an attempt to escape responsibility. It is an effort to prevent the project manager from becoming personally accountable for another organization's unanswered email.

An essential part of professional judgment is distinguishing a desirable deadline from a credible commitment. Senior management may have good reasons to request an eight-week launch. The date could be tied to advertising, seasonal demand, or an important commercial

opportunity. That makes the target meaningful. It does not establish that all necessary activities fit inside the available time. Oliver can support the objective while explaining that confirmation depends on checking the requirements, dependencies, and capacity of the people involved. A useful initial response might be: "We'll plan toward that date. I need to validate the integration requirements and acceptance process before confirming the full release." That sentence preserves momentum without pretending the planning work has already been completed.

Of course, uncertainty cannot become an excuse for avoiding every decision. A manager who permanently responds, "We need more analysis," may eventually become the company's most accomplished collector of unanswered questions. Different commitments require different levels of investigation. A small, reversible task may be accepted with limited information and adjusted during execution. A system handling customer payments deserves more careful preparation. The amount of planning should reflect the consequences of being wrong. If uncertainty concerns a minor visual preference, there may be little reason to delay work. If uncertainty involves a critical function, external approval, or expensive irreversible commitment, taking additional time to establish the facts is usually more sensible than treating optimism as evidence.

When estimating the work, involve the people who understand its actual execution. A director may know why the result matters without knowing how many steps are required to produce it. Conversely, a specialist may accurately estimate a technical activity without understanding the broader business deadline. Both perspectives are needed. Oliver should ask developers

about implementation complexity, customer-service staff about foreseeable support problems, and operations about deployment conditions. He must then combine their contributions rather than simply adding the most attractive numbers. Estimates should account for real availability, not an imaginary week in which nobody attends meetings, answers customer questions, takes leave, or encounters unexpected complications.

One danger deserves particular attention: estimates can become negotiations before anybody has discussed what might change. A developer suggests twelve working days for a feature. The manager asks whether ten might be possible. Somebody mentions eight, and the number eventually becomes six because the presentation needs to fit an attractive timeline. No requirement has been removed, no resource added, and no assumption improved. The estimate has merely suffered a series of social encounters. If a shorter duration is proposed, ask what makes it achievable. Perhaps an existing component can be reused or a time-consuming requirement simplified. Those are legitimate reasons to revise the plan. The fact that six sounds more exciting than twelve is not.

It is equally important to make ownership boundaries visible. Responsibility for coordinating delivery does not automatically include authority over every team, supplier, or commercial decision involved. Oliver may own the project schedule while another manager controls the developers' priorities. Marketing may own customer communication, and finance may control expenditure. When their decisions affect the promised outcome, the relationship must be clear. Who can authorize a change? Who provides the necessary input? Who resolves competing priorities? If nobody

answers these questions, the project manager can end up responsible for commitments they have no power to fulfill. That arrangement looks efficient on an organizational chart because it only requires one name in the accountability box. Reality tends to demand more detail.

A brief written agreement helps turn these conversations into something usable. It should identify the intended outcome, the main deliverables, the definition of completion, significant dependencies, important exclusions, and unresolved decisions. The purpose is not to protect everyone from every imaginable future disagreement. It is to give participants a reliable reference when circumstances change. In Oliver's case, the agreement might specify that the first release supports membership registration and renewal at selected locations, while advanced personalization requires separate approval. If someone later asks why the personalization feature is missing, the conversation can refer to an actual decision rather than competing memories of an enthusiastic brainstorming session.

Written clarity is particularly valuable when work crosses departmental boundaries. People who participate in the original meeting may understand a decision perfectly, while colleagues receiving the assignment later know only a deadline and a project name. Information becomes compressed as it travels. "Initial release for selected clubs" can quietly turn into "company-wide launch," especially when passed between people who are eager to communicate progress. A concise agreement reduces that risk. It should be easy enough to consult that people actually use it, rather than becoming a document whose most

significant achievement is occupying a folder labeled Governance.

Sometimes agreement will remain incomplete. A stakeholder may be unable to choose between competing requirements, or necessary information may not yet exist. In that case, record the uncertainty instead of disguising it as a settled matter. Identify the working assumption, the person responsible for confirming it, and the point at which the decision becomes necessary. Work that is genuinely independent can continue while the uncertainty is resolved. Work that would create substantial rework or unacceptable risk may need to wait. The appropriate response depends on the consequences of proceeding. An unresolved detail is manageable when everyone understands it. It becomes dangerous when the plan quietly assumes that somebody else must already have taken care of it.

Consider what happens when Oliver finally presents his findings. The full customer experience, including every desired integration and support feature, cannot credibly be confirmed within eight weeks. A narrower launch for a selected group of clubs appears feasible, subject to timely access to the required systems and successful testing. This information may disappoint people who expected a company-wide transformation. Nevertheless, it creates a real decision. Management can reconsider the timing, change the initial scope, provide additional support, or explicitly accept certain risks within appropriate boundaries. Oliver has not rejected the company's ambition. He has made the conditions of achieving it understandable.

There will still be moments when someone says, "We need you to take ownership and make it happen." You can accept ownership of your actual role without claiming

powers you do not possess. You might respond, "I'll take responsibility for coordinating delivery, keeping the plan current, and identifying decisions that affect the outcome. I can confirm the final commitment once the required dependencies and scope are agreed." That distinction is not corporate wordplay. It determines what you can responsibly promise, what others must contribute, and how success will eventually be assessed. A capable manager is not someone who absorbs every uncertainty until it disappears from everyone else's view.

Before your next major commitment, pay attention to the moment when a room agrees too quickly. It may be genuine alignment, but it may also mean that nobody has examined the meaning of the promise closely enough to discover disagreement. Ask what must be delivered, how completion will be recognized, which assumptions matter, and who can authorize the necessary decisions. You do not need to turn a simple assignment into a constitutional convention. You need enough shared understanding that the people doing the work and the people expecting the result are participating in the same project.

Because the most expensive surprise is not always discovering that your team cannot deliver what was promised. Sometimes it is discovering that everyone agrees you promised something different, and every version apparently has your name attached to it.

Chapter 2 - The Work That Sneaks in Through the Side Door

Nobody officially increased the workload of the museum's facilities team. This was an important fact, frequently mentioned by senior management whenever the technicians complained about being stretched. The approved maintenance schedule remained unchanged, staffing levels were stable, and the department's annual objectives were exactly as agreed. Yet somehow, every week became busier. The education department needed help preparing an interactive workshop. The events team requested additional lighting for a private reception. A curator wanted several display cases moved, and the director's assistant asked whether somebody could urgently improve the appearance of the entrance before an important visitor arrived. Individually, the requests sounded reasonable. Collectively, they created a second maintenance department that existed nowhere in the budget. Its unofficial operating procedure was remarkably simple: find someone wearing a facilities uniform and say, "Could you just quickly..."

Daniel, the facilities manager, initially welcomed this flexibility. His team knew the building, understood the equipment, and enjoyed being useful. If a projector failed during an educational session, somebody would fix it. If an exhibition needed a minor adjustment, a technician would help. These small interventions made the museum function smoothly, and Daniel had no intention of creating unnecessary barriers between departments. But as the requests multiplied, planned maintenance began slipping. A ventilation inspection was postponed twice. Repairs to a

storage area remained unfinished. Preventive work on older equipment was repeatedly pushed aside because nobody considered it more urgent than the latest unexpected request. At the monthly review, Daniel was asked why his team had completed only seventy percent of its scheduled work. Nobody mentioned the additional requests, because nobody had formally recorded them. The missing thirty percent appeared to be an efficiency problem rather than the consequence of work arriving through several unofficial channels.

This is how invisible workload develops. Most managers can identify the activities included in their official plans. They know which projects have deadlines, which assignments have owners, and which responsibilities appear in departmental objectives. What they often cannot see clearly is everything that happens around those commitments. Employees answer questions, investigate unusual problems, help colleagues, correct incomplete information, attend unexpected discussions, and perform small favors that prevent other departments from getting stuck. Much of this work is legitimate. Some of it is essential. Yet if it never appears in capacity planning, the organization behaves as though it consumes no resources. A technician might spend forty-five minutes solving a problem for another department and still be expected to finish the original maintenance assignment at the same time. Apparently, being helpful comes with access to a separate clock unavailable to less cooperative employees.

The first mistake is assuming that every additional request is genuinely small because the person requesting it describes it that way. "We only need one display cabinet moved" sounds straightforward until somebody checks the

cabinet's weight, confirms whether exhibits must be removed, organizes safe handling, and finds an appropriate time when the gallery is closed to visitors. The visible action might take twenty minutes. Preparing and coordinating it can take considerably longer. Similar differences occur in office work. A minor change to a report may require checking several data sources. A quick customer answer might involve investigating an unusual contractual condition. A simple adjustment to a software tool can require testing to ensure it doesn't break something else. The size of the requested change and the effort required to produce it are not reliably interchangeable.

Daniel discovered another complication when he started examining where his team's hours actually went. The museum employed six facilities staff members, giving it a theoretical maximum of 240 paid working hours during a standard forty-hour week. For illustration, suppose ninety of those hours were already committed to routine operations and scheduled safety-related work, thirty-two to regular exhibition support, and twenty-four were unavailable because of planned leave. That would leave ninety-four hours for other maintenance and improvement tasks, before accounting for additional interruptions. If urgent requests then consumed forty-five of those hours, less than fifty would remain for the originally planned work. The exact figures would vary by week, and estimates would need checking against actual activity. The point is that six employees do not automatically provide 240 hours of unrestricted project capacity. They provide six people with a mixture of commitments, obligations, and availability.

This distinction matters because managers are frequently asked to explain why a team cannot absorb one more