



*“Take time to deliberate; but when the time for action arrives, stop thinking and go in.”*

*- Napoleon*

# Multi-Phased Projects and the Ticking Clock

BY DAVID LEIGHOW

In virtually any work endeavor, time plays a key factor in our success. Achieving the goal on time often takes on a status matching the quality of the goal itself. But how often does time, or the perception of timely achievement, mar the outcome? Does attention to time interfere with the quality of the work? In short, do time and outcome conflict, and if so, how is this conflict best resolved?

## Some Concepts of Time

With a few very notable exceptions, major sporting events are based on the clock. The team with the most points when time runs out wins. The winner of a race is the person with the best time when the finish line is reached.

Author Stacey Charter wrote, “Life is all about timing...the unreachable becomes reachable, the unavailable becomes available, the unattainable...attainable. Have the patience, wait it out. It’s all about timing.” Looked at from this perspective, one might conclude that time aids, not hinders, the achievement of goals. We are often taught in youth that patience is a virtue and that good things come to those who wait. So how realistic is this viewpoint in an age of high-speed technology and within a culture that is goal-driven?

We have taken for granted that the unattainable is attainable, that what may have seemed unachievable only a short while ago is, indeed, capable of achievement. There is perhaps no greater evidence that we can accomplish what seemed for centuries to be unreachable, at least for us baby boomers, than the first manned mission to the moon in 1969. Science, technology and culture have all progressed at speeds we even now have trouble conceiving.

## Getting a Grip on Time

Consider a football game. It’s late in the fourth quarter, and your opponent just scored to go ahead by five points. You need a touchdown to win; a field goal clearly won’t cut it. Your opponent’s kick-off goes through the end-zone, so you are faced with going 80 yards down field for a score, with less than two minutes left on the clock. You have initiated your two-minute offense, a drill you have gone through in practice many times. But you are now in the real world, and time is not your ally. What you do now, unlike the practice setting, cannot be fixed if you fail. As the head coach, you are inclined to follow Napoleon’s strategy—you’ve deliberated this situation in countless practice scenarios. The time for action has arrived. Is it time to stop thinking and go in?

For most coaches, the thinking really does not stop now. Yes, you have to act, and you have a limited amount of time to do so. But, you also know that your opponent’s reaction to your strategy is unpredictable. What defensive schemes will your opponent use? How will he adjust to any changes you decide to make? How do you, in turn, tweak your offensive schemes to stay ahead of the defense?

In the world of commerce and industry, time may present you with two-minute drills, and like Napoleon and the coach, you may determine that it is time to stop thinking and go in. Scheduled deadlines, like the clock in a football game, can make you or break you. Time may well be your enemy, not your ally. When you need that victory, how can you get a grip on time in a way that minimizes the menace it otherwise appears? How can you turn time around and make it work to your advantage?

## Deadlines are Not Optional

Consider a multi-phased highway development and construction project. The project comes out of an extensive statewide planning process and moves into project development. Typically, the first two phases are preliminary design and environmental analysis. Before an agency can buy and clear the land necessary for construction, proposed alternative alignments are developed and the environmental effects of those alternatives are evaluated. Eventually, the agency will issue a determination (which may be in the form of a Record of Decision or a Finding of No Significant Impact) that will allow the last two pre-construction phases to occur—final design and land acquisition/right of way clearance.

All of these phases are scheduled along a timeline, and the target of that schedule is certification that the right of way has been cleared and the project may be advertised for construction. It often happens, however, that delays occur during preliminary design and the environmental studies phases. No matter how well planned the project is, the results of the environmental analyses are not easily predictable, and delays may be inevitable.

But, all too often, projects with multiple phases get off schedule, and the last phase bears the brunt of the delay. If the earlier phases are not completed on schedule, then we are typically faced with two options—either move out the target date or squeeze the last phase. In our culture, the latter is apt to be the likely choice. The problem with this option, however, is that the integrity of the project—in some cases, even the legal or regulatory requirements for the project—can be seriously compromised.

There is often little room in the schedule for being late. So, what is the solution? How do we resolve the conflict between timely project delivery and the need for a quality result? Can we do it faster and better? The simple answer is to create an environment that's based on structure, but includes some flexibility. Focus on the outcome of the delivery, and what is necessary to providing a quality product in the time allotted.

## Structured Flexibility

To successfully move a project forward in a timely manner without affecting the quality of the outcome is a challenge we all face. The answer is in the creation of the schedule itself. To create a schedule that is structured, but flexible, you might want to try some of these key elements:

1. Start working on the schedule as early as possible.
2. Clearly establish the driving forces behind the project, and determine whether there is an absolute, set completion point. For example, if there is a political commitment to deliver the project by a certain date, engage those who are responsible for setting that date in the scheduling process.

3. Before finalizing the project schedule, involve all stakeholders who will be engaged in any of the project phases.
4. Ensure that contingent plans are made for addressing potential project delays. History is a great teacher, and an awareness of causes of delay on past projects will aid in planning for such contingencies.
5. Clarify up front what needs must be met in order for the project outcome to be successful. Project needs can include compliance with applicable laws and regulations, adherence to quality control standards, and recognition of stakeholder needs and concerns.
6. Anticipate problems and determine how they might impact the schedule. Identify potential solutions in advance. Again, look at past projects as a guide to identifying project challenges.
7. Try to keep schedule changes within the phase where they occur. For example, if a delay shows up because of a problem with air quality data during the environmental phase, look at other tasks within the environmental phase for opportunities to make schedule adjustments. Alternatively, in the case of additional staff, consider a short-term ramping-up of resources to address delays. Avoid encumbering latter phases with the consequences of earlier ones. Address schedule problems when and where they occur.
8. From start to finish, focus on the quality of the outcome. This is not to say that time is not of the essence. We already have established a need to get the project out the door and under construction. But, consider this paraphrase of Napoleon's strategy, "Take time to deliberate; but when the time for action arrives, continue thinking as you go in."

The bottom line is simple: Make time work for you; don't work for it.



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