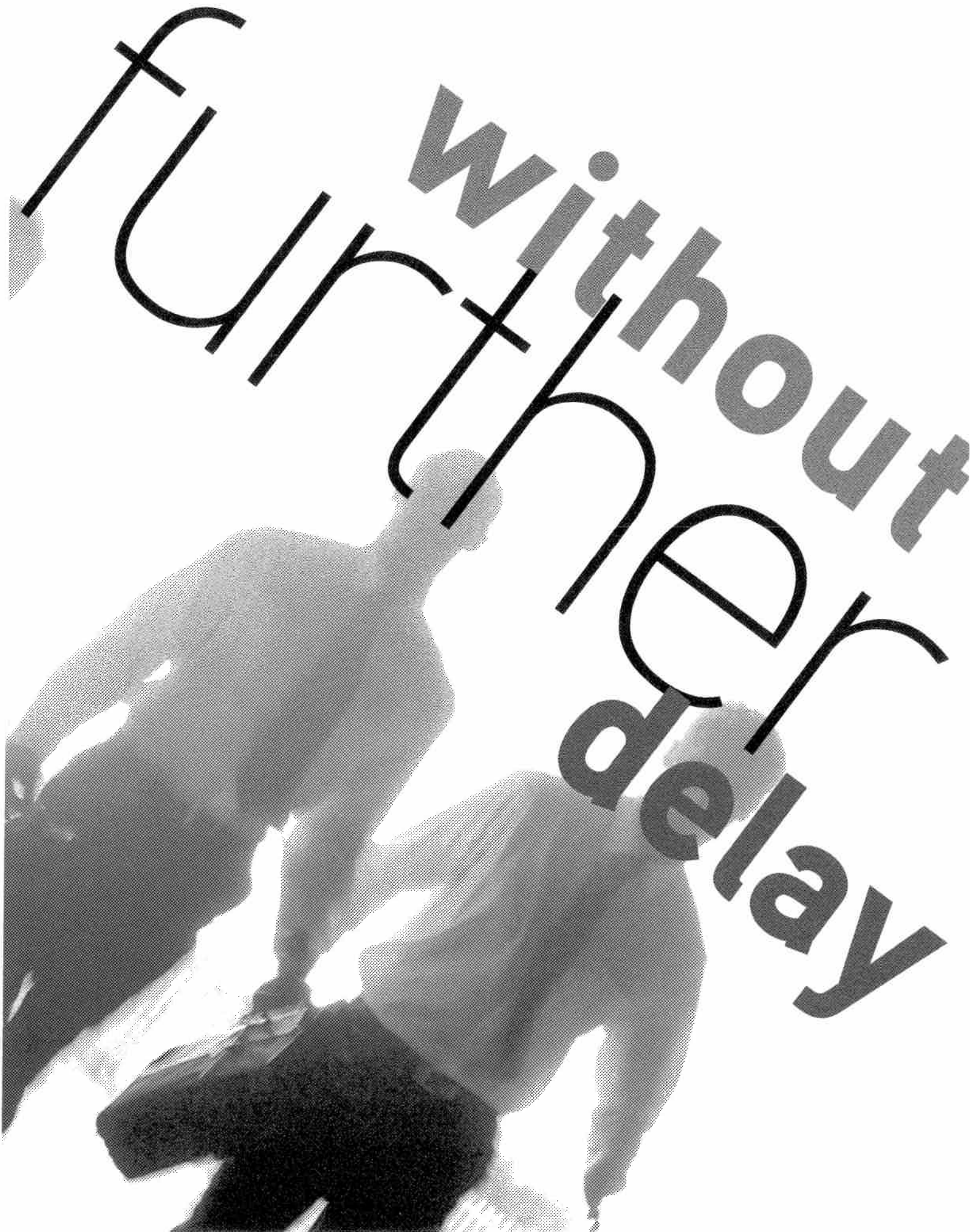


When a project goes off schedule,  
how can you make up lost time—without  
affecting team morale or quality?

BY MICHELLE BOWLES



# A resourcing delay is hard

enough to handle at sea level. High in the Andes mountains, it can potentially doom a project.

On a recent mining project in that South American range, procurement of the main equipment wasn't going to happen in time. Because it was an activity in the critical path, the entire schedule would be compromised.

Almost every project professional has been there. It's how you handle such a crisis that makes the difference between success and failure.

In this case, Edwin Monzón, PMI-RMP, PMI-SP, PMP, project scheduler for Antamina, a mining company in San Marcos, Peru, identified the holdup as quickly as possible.

This was accomplished by analyzing the variation between baseline dates and forecast dates from purchase status reports and expediting status reports for every purchase order. The project control group created a "traffic light" tool that identified the variances by color.

"This let us identify, quickly and easily, the procurement delays in a project with a lot of purchase orders," Mr. Monzón says.

The project risk management plan had a cost contingency for change in the method of transportation for delayed purchase orders.

"In my project, it was better to pay for air transportation than pay for a contractor claim for stopped resources—both people and equipment," he adds.

By switching the method of transporting the supplies from sea to air, his project team was able to make up the time.

But just as that scheduling conflict was under control, another cropped up.

"As soon as the equipment began to arrive at the mine, we had a strike

led by the local community, which delayed the equipment installation," Mr. Monzón says.

There are seemingly endless glitches that can throw off a project's schedule—stakeholder issues, poor planning and lack of resources, to name a few. So it's no wonder many projects fail to deliver on time.

While some scheduling challenges can't always be avoided, project managers can regain lost time and get their projects back on track without sacrificing quality or team morale.

In Mr. Monzón's case, he built a time contingency into the schedule to account for possible risks.

"According to our project risk-management plan, we had assigned schedule contingency to the equipment installation activity that helped the project be completed on time," he says.

## **DANGER: SCHEDULING PITFALLS AHEAD**

There may not be a single reason why a project gets thrown off-kilter. There are, however, plenty of mistakes that practically ensure a project will fall behind schedule—poor initial planning being a prime culprit.

"We usually say, 'If you failed to plan, you planned to fail,'" says Lotfy Sabry, CAPM, PMI-RMP, PMI-SP, PMP, PgMP, owner of the project management consultancy EPM (Experts Project Management) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

In many cases, project sponsors or company executives push to start the project quickly rather than dedicate time to good planning, according to Don Wessels, PMP, senior consultant and instructor in the project and program management business unit of Management Concepts, a training firm in Vienna, Virginia, USA.

Scheduling problems can quickly result from several issues, Mr. Monzón says, including:

- deficient scope definition
- poor stakeholder identification

## » PREVENTION IS THE BEST MEDICINE

Avoid scheduling delays in the first place by incorporating these five strategies:

- 1 Create the project plan well in advance.** "If you don't start planning the project until you're ready to go, you'll always be in recovery," says Harold "Mike" Mosley Jr., PMP, Zachry, San Antonio, Texas, USA.
- 2 Get a good grasp of stakeholders' requirements.** Gather six to eight key stakeholders to not only discuss their requirements but also to better understand the rationale behind them. "Ask, 'What will you gain? How does that tie back to the organizational mission?'" says Don Wessels, PMP, Management Concepts, Vienna, Virginia, USA.
- 3 Involve more than just the key stakeholders in the planning.** "A lot of times, one group or person will do it and expect everyone to follow it," Mr. Mosley says. But even the lowest-ranked team member can offer valuable insight. "You don't have to be an expert on the topic to give a possible solution or idea. Sometimes a fresh set of eyes can be the solution," he says.
- 4 Conduct a schedule risk analysis as part of the planning.** Create a contingency plan based on the specific project risks, says Edwin Monzon, PMP, PMI-RMP, PMI-SP, Antamina, San Marcos, Peru. "For example, in a mining project in South America, the time contingency plan should be aligned with risks like community strikes, complex procurement in remote locations and low performance for work in high altitudes," he says.
- 5 Establish a team operating agreement.** In it, include how team members will work together, how they will handle issues and, if an issue can't be resolved, who will handle it, Mr. Wessels says.

- lack of a resource usage plan
- no risk-management plan
- poor constraint identification

Some sort of project planning must take place at the start, Mr. Wessels says. Bring together key stakeholders, team members and a facilitator to discuss requirements and scope.

"The project launch or rapid project planning process doesn't have to take a long time, but it's a crucial step," he says. "It's important to get everyone on board at the start. If you don't have full participation from stakeholders and team members, you won't have full buy-in. This could cause serious problems and might not be reconciled until much later in the project."

Another common scheduling pitfall: lack of a clear executive mission. Without it, project priorities are estab-

lished based on individual politics or agendas rather than the organization's goals, says Harold "Mike" Mosley Jr., PMP, program director of the nuclear construction division of Zachry, a project management, engineering, procurement and construction contractor in San Antonio, Texas, USA. He is also the committee chair for PMI's *Practice Standard for Scheduling*—Second Edition.

Mr. Mosley was part of a project with an engineering team in Boston, Massachusetts, USA that worked for several years before construction work began on the project. The project sponsor refused to bring together the two remote teams. As a result, they never developed a good working relationship, he says.

"The executive's priorities were on short-term cost savings rather than the long-term benefit," Mr. Mosley adds.

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"The project cost and schedule suffered as a result."

Instead, Mr. Wessels says, a clear executive mission should be communicated at the start of the project and reinforced throughout.

"At the end of each major piece of work, a control gate review of deliverables should be conducted to ensure the project is performing as planned and is still aligned with the mission of the organization and delivering the value for which the project was started," he says. "It's a periodic opportunity to stress the mission and determine if the mission has changed."

Poor resourcing can also be detrimental to a project's schedule.

"When there aren't enough resources, the project team is forced into overtime, and morale drops dramatically," Mr. Wessels says.

Improperly skilled resources can be just as problematic.

"'Availability' is not a skill set. You can't just use the next available body," he says. "In addition to quality and inefficiency issues, team morale will suffer because they know they aren't doing well."

The immediate reaction to the first sign of a schedule delay is often to have teams work harder, longer, faster. But that's not always the best answer.

For one thing, overworking team members—even with financial com-

pensation—will likely take a toll on morale and quality.

"Even though team members are working longer hours, productivity can drop 60 percent, especially after six to eight weeks of continued overtime," Mr. Wessels says. "Then team members get burned out, jump ship to another project or leave the organization altogether."

## SAVE THE TEAM, SAVE THE SCHEDULE

Sometimes there's just no way to get a project back on track other than to involve an extra surge from team members, Mr. Sabry says.

One of the most traumatic scheduling complications of his career occurred when he was managing a project in the United Arab Emirates and then-president Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan died. The entire country, including its government offices, immediately shut down for nearly two weeks.

Mr. Sabry leveraged the schedule compression technique to shorten the project schedule without minimizing scope, and employed fast-tracking to expedite certain project tasks by completing them simultaneously.

This involved team members putting in some extra hours. To maintain morale, he made sure to reward and recognize their efforts through bonuses, time off, certificates of achievement and training opportunities.

"If I know we have a big push coming up, I might give the team a day or an afternoon off," Mr. Wessels says. "That's a strong incentive. People come back with more vigor and energy."

To ensure team morale stays intact as the schedule is restored, project managers must maintain clear lines of communication.

"Project leaders should inform the team of the recovery plan and keep them updated on the status," Mr. Monzón says.

During the schedule recovery period, project managers should dis-

## ➤ NEGATIVE FLOAT

In a discussion in the PMI Scheduling Community of Practice, Stuart Miller, CAPM, PMI-SP, writes, "The most common way I've seen for having 'apparent' negative float is unrecognized concurrent activity. The second most common is estimates that are padded. I often employ a critical chain approach to time-sensitive projects, cutting all the padding out of individual tasks and providing the buffer time at key coordination points."



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cuss with team members what is needed and how each new task is going to get it done, Mr. Mosley adds.

Communication also involves getting out in the trenches, talking to team members and looking for clues that morale may be suffering.

"When you talk to team members, are they with you in the conversation and paying attention, or are they looking out the window and zoning out?" Mr. Mosley asks. "If they come in dragging in the morning and in the evening, you've got a problem."

Institute quality-control measures as the project gets back on track. That doesn't necessarily mean a large quality-assurance team must be hired, according to Mr. Mosley. "It starts with the team member, his or her supervisor, and the supervisor's supervisor," he says.

Quality monitoring should be conducted throughout the project life cycle—not just until the schedule is restored. Track deliverables to assure they meet specifications and requirements, as well as how often the same work must be repeated because of quality issues.

Finally, it never hurts to infuse some humor in the schedule recovery plan, Mr. Mosley advises. He managed a construction project for a national power provider in Florida, USA that was running behind schedule, largely due to bad weather. The project team hadn't taken into account rain drainage issues at the work site, and it became flooded.

"The project sponsor came down for a monthly meeting and told me that 'Not even a bucketful of fairy dust could get this project back on schedule,'" he says. To keep up team morale, he bought a keychain depicting Tinker Bell, the fairy from *Peter Pan*, and hung it on the wall.

The team set about modifying the site layout to keep it dry. In the end, the project came in a month ahead of schedule.

"I took a picture of the Tinker Bell



## >TIP Adding resources

**won't always alleviate scheduling delays, says Harold "Mike" Mosley Jr., PMP, Zachry, San Antonio, Texas, USA.** "You might have a delivery coming from a vendor across the globe, and it hasn't arrived yet," he says. "If you worked everyone on the project seven days a week, you're wasting that time because the team members aren't affecting what's driving the schedule issue."

keychain, framed it and presented it to the project sponsor," Mr. Mosley says.

Most of the time, though, there's nothing funny about project schedule delays. In an effort to salvage the schedule, project managers can inadvertently kill their team's energy and toss quality out the door.

But that doesn't have to be the case, Mr. Mosley says.

Just keep it simple. "Focus your corrective measure on what is wrong and what you can affect," he advises. "It may be an issue beyond the scope of what you can address. Once you figure out what the issue is, then you can look for workarounds." ■