

Managing Unrealistic Project Expectations¹

Harold Kerzner, Ph.D. and Al Zeitoun, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

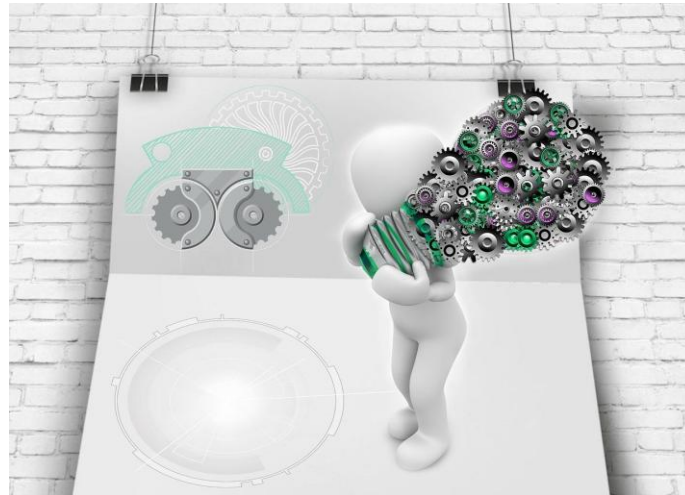
Perhaps the biggest challenge facing project managers is being assigned a project that is based upon unrealistic expectations. The unreasonable expectations are most frequently based upon the deliverables requested but could also be based upon time allowed, funding available, and skill levels of the workers to be assigned.

It is not uncommon for many projects to begin based upon just an idea that has not been fully evaluated for development risks, requires innovation and creativity, and contains many uncertainties in the assumptions. Project teams that are experienced in managing R&D projects often live in a world of unrealistic expectations and learn how to cope. For other project managers, unrealistic expectations can create serious stress and headaches resulting in poor leadership and erroneous decision-making.

As shown in Figure 1, a possible dilemma could be created when there is a number of great ideas that could be driving the possible solutions for the reason a project exists in the first place. There could be also a number of ideas driving the views and expectations of project stakeholders for what good looks like and what success means. Project managers should have a compass and set of guides to help them navigate through the possible complexities that this expectations management topic creates.

Having a good approach to communication, taking time in the front end of a project, and being able to attract and sustain strong project sponsorship, could all help project managers minimize their possible expectations stresses. It is also our hope that the project manager could seize this challenge as an opportunity to enhance timely critical project dialogues and implement the practices project risk management to the benefit of all involved in setting and managing the project expectations lifecycle.

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(<https://pixabay.com/illustrations/manager-engineer-work-business-man-2148223/>)

Figure 1. Ideas and Expectations

SOURCES OF UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The most common cause of unrealistic expectations occurs on internal projects. Project initiation most often occurs during the project's fuzzy front end (FFE) where executives and managers meet to decide what projects to undertake and the accompanying priority of the projects.

Participants in the FFE meeting often have never managed projects and may be quite unfamiliar with current project management practices. The FFE committee may select projects that are deemed necessary for the business to grow and perhaps unintentionally establish unrealistic expectations in the hope that the project team can achieve success.

Project managers and knowledgeable team members most frequently are not invited to participate in the FFE meetings. The project manager may not even know about the project until he/she is informed that they are now in charge of the project and provided with a business case and statement of work. Once the team is formed and reads the project's requirements, reality sets in and the team recognizes the challenges.

Another situation is when the sales force bids on contracts based upon anticipated project profitability without validating first that the client's expectations can be met. Project teams may not participate during the bidding process but are then expected to achieve what may not be possible.

A third situation occurs when executives, project sponsors and stakeholders have hidden agendas and establish unrealistic expectations that, if achievable, may benefit them personally. In all three situations, project managers then discover quickly that the expectations set by others (or even some expectations we set for ourselves) are most likely improbable or unattainable. Project teams are then pressured to make the dream of a successful project a reality.

TIP The art of achieving more realistic expectations rests in the critical early project focus that requires courageous dialogues with the right stakeholders.

THE EXPECTATIONS ENVIRONMENT

All companies have the desire for growth and survivability. Establishing expectations, whether realistic or unrealistic, is a necessary part of strategic planning. The challenge is not in establishing the expectations, but knowing when to take a step backwards, understanding that some of the expectations may not be achievable, and compromising for something that is attainable.

The longer that project teams endure the pain of unrealistic expectations, the greater the likelihood that team and organizational friction will exist causing havoc to problem solving and decision-making activities.

New project management methodologies are based upon short steps allowing for rapid changes to take place in the project plans. This makes it easier to redirect projects quickly to results that can be attained. Allowing prolonged participation in activities that cannot be achieved within reasonable time or cost constraints can destroy an organization's culture and teamwork and result in the departure of resources that possess critically needed skills.

TIP A critical cornerstone to healthy teams is prioritizing what expectations matter. This leads to higher agility in future organizations.

BREAKING AWAY FROM UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Working on some projects that begin with unrealistic expectations is a fact of life in today's businesses. However, there must also exist a culture that supports a willingness to embrace realistic thinking, establishes achievable goals, and allows for necessary changes to be made. Although we begin some projects with unrealistic expectations, revisions may be possible whereby we end up with either better expectations or ideas we did not originally think about.

There are steps that project managers may follow to reduce unrealistic expectations. Most of these steps apply to all projects where there might be significant unknowns.

Step #1: Review the expectations and requirements with the project team. Project managers may need assistance from team members to determine if the expectations are realistic. This requires understanding the specifics. Sometimes it is best to have these discussions in a one-on-one mode with individual team members. Some team members may not wish their concerns to be discussed in a group setting, especially if it relates to their capabilities. If any doubt still exists after review by the team, experts may be brought into the projects for advice and support. If obstacles exist, prepare a list of the obstacles for future discussions.

Step #2: Prepare a list of realistic expectations. Setting realistic expectations does not mean succumbing to the obstacles and giving up on chasing the dreams. Team members may still believe that all or part of the original expectations may be achievable and may wish to proceed. Some people may view expectations as a challenge for personal growth and demonstrate a willingness to proceed.

Step #3: Communicate with the expectation owners. Meet with the person or team that created the expectations and carefully understand their concerns. Then reflect upon what you and your team believe are reasonable expectations and provide concrete examples from past experiences if possible. Discuss the obstacles you have identified and what may and may not be possible without placing blame upon any individuals. Clearly communicate the alternative options. Above all, understand that the purpose of the meeting is to help build trust between all of the parties involved.

Step #4: Prepare for change. Discuss with your team the results of your meeting with the people that established their expectations. Establish realistic workload expectations and boundary conditions on topics such as time, cost, quality, risk, and safety so that the team

understands limitations that may be necessary. Encourage team members to seek help from coworkers if necessary.

Step #5: Monitor team progress closely. Ineffectively managing unrealistic or risky expectations can induce pressure upon the team resulting in team friction where workers refuse to collaborate with one another and create problems. Carefully monitor the performance of each team member, perhaps using walk-the-halls management and having frequent one-on-one discussions with each team member.

TIP A tactical set of steps could be beneficial in managing project expectations. Most of these steps build on a strong foundation of empathetic communication.

CULTURAL THEMES

- Lack of Clear Communication Channels
 - When expectations aren't explicitly communicated, especially during project scoping, misunderstandings become inevitable. Industry feedback highlights that "understanding expectations without communication" creates gaps, leading to friction and frustration.
- Overestimation of Capacity or Capability
 - Supervisors often set expectations based on ideal scenarios, ignoring bandwidth, complexity, or staff shortages. Examples such as "meeting deadlines while short-staffed" or "overly demanding workloads" directly reflect this.
- Cultural Tolerance of Overwork
 - The changing dynamics with technology and ways of working, coupled with the pressure to work during vacation or continually take on more tasks suggests that some organizations equate commitment with availability, fostering burnout and setting an unhealthy precedent.
- Neglecting to Adjust for Change

- Projects evolve, but expectations often remain static. The idea of “being ready for change” is a key. Failure to adapt timelines and goals leads to rigidity and stress.

THE PATH FORWARD

In order to be future ready with better handling of project’s expectations, a few takeaways could be considered:

Expectation Reset Loops Built into Project Lifecycle

In the future, leading organizations will adopt built-in expectation recalibration points—scheduled reflection and re-alignment sessions to update scope, resources, and capacity regularly.

Empathy-Driven Project Management

The growing emphasis on psychological safety means managers will be trained to identify overextension signs and respond with curiosity, not criticism. This is being strategic: “consider your supervisor’s intentions” and “get curious.”

Transparent Workload Visibility Systems

Expect platforms that track workload, deadlines, and real-time availability to be deeply integrated, thus creating clarity for everyone and reducing assumptions.

Celebration and Positive Reinforcement Culture

Organizations that normalize acknowledgment, especially when teams succeed under pressure, are more likely to retain talent and build trust.

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About the Authors



Harold Kerzner, Ph.D., MS, M.B.A

Senior Executive Director for Project Management
International Institute of Learning
New York & Florida, USA



Dr. Harold Kerzner is Senior Executive Director for Project Management for the International Institute for Learning (IIL). He has an MS and Ph.D. in Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Utah State University. He is a prior Air Force Officer and spent several years at Morton-Thiokol in project management. He taught engineering at the University of Illinois and business administration at Utah State University, and for 38 years taught project management at Baldwin-Wallace University. He has published or presented numerous engineering and business papers and has had published more than 60 college textbooks/workbooks on project management, including later editions. Some of his books are (1) Project Management: A Systems Approach to Planning, Scheduling and Controlling; (2) Project Management Metrics, KPIs and Dashboards, (3) Project Management Case Studies, (4) Project Management Best Practices: Achieving Global Excellence, (5) PM 2.0: The Future of Project Management, (6) Using the Project Management Maturity Model, and (7) Innovation Project Management.

He is a charter member of the Northeast Ohio PMI Chapter.

Dr. Kerzner has traveled around the world conducting project management lectures for PMI Chapters and companies in Japan, China, Russia, Brazil, Singapore, Korea, South Africa, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Poland, Croatia, Mexico, Trinidad, Barbados, The Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Venezuela, Columbia, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy, England, and Switzerland. He delivered a keynote speech at a PMI Global Congress on the future of project management.

His recognitions include:

- The University of Illinois granted Dr. Kerzner a Distinguished Recent Alumni Award in 1981 for his contributions to the field of project management.
- Utah State University provided Dr. Kerzner with the 1998 Distinguished Service Award for his contributions to the field of project management.
- The Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Project Management Institute gives out the Kerzner Award once a year to one project manager in Northeast Ohio that has demonstrated excellence in project management. They also give out a second Kerzner Award for project of the year in Northeast Ohio.
- The Project Management Institute (National Organization) in cooperation with IIL has initiated the Kerzner International Project Manager of the Year Award given to one project manager yearly anywhere in the world that demonstrated excellence in project management.
- The Project Management Institute also gives out four scholarships each year in Dr. Kerzner's name for graduate studies in project management.
- Baldwin-Wallace University has instituted the Kerzner Distinguished Lecturer Series in project management.
- The Italian Institute of Project Management presented Dr. Kerzner with the 2019 International ISIPM Award for his contributions to the field of project management.

Dr. Harold Kerzner can be contacted at hkerzner@hotmail.com



Dr. Al Zeitoun, PgMP, PMI Fellow

Strategy Advisor & Global Future of Work Executive
Maryland USA



Dr. Al Zeitoun is a Future of Work, business optimization, and operational performance excellence thought leader with global experiences in strategy execution. His experiences encompass leading organizations; delivering their Enterprise Digital and Business Transformation; guiding fitting frameworks implementations; and using his empathy, engineering insights, and collaboration strengths to successfully envision new business models and execute complex missions across diverse cultures globally.

In his recent role with Siemens, he was a Senior Director of Strategy responsible for driving the global program management practices, Master Plan governance, and enabling the Strategy Transformation processes and priorities.

In his position, as the Executive Director for Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, Abu Dhabi, UAE, he was responsible for creating the strategy execution framework, achieving transformation benefits, governance excellence, and creating the data analytics discipline necessary for delivering on the \$40B complex country energy mission roadmap.

At the McLean, USA HQ of Booz Allen Hamilton, Dr. Zeitoun strategically envisioned and customized digitally enabled EPMO advisory, mapped playbooks, and capability development for clients' Billions of Dollars strategic initiatives. Furthermore, he led the firm's Middle East North Africa Portfolio Management and Agile Governance Solutions.

With the International Institute of Learning, Dr. Zeitoun played a senior leader and global trainer and coach. He was instrumental in driving its global expansions, thought leadership, and operational excellence methodology to sense and shape dynamic ways of working across organizations worldwide. He speaks English, Arabic, and German and enjoys good food, travel, and volunteering. Dr. Al Zeitoun can be contacted at zeitounstrategy@gmail.com