

Project manager delusions embarrass project sponsors ¹

Yogi Schulz

Delusional behaviours among project managers are more common than we care to admit. Project sponsors can easily become the political victims of this behaviour when projects fail unless they're close enough to the project to recognize the signs and intervene.

Delusional behaviours are a pattern of persistent beliefs or behaviours that are disconnected from objective evidence and resistant to correction. When left unaddressed, such behaviour will materially damage project outcomes, team morale, and organizational credibility.

The incentives for project managers to engage in this ultimately self-destructive behaviour are particularly strong in complex, high-stakes environments such as information technology, construction, compliance, engineering, and large-scale business transformation projects.

Every project manager and their team are motivated to achieve milestones on time, demonstrate their capability, and frame events in a positive light. Unfortunately, that well-meaning desire can cause teams to:

- Produce overly optimistic effort estimates for tasks.
- Underestimate the probability and impact of risks.
- Rely unquestioningly on vendor commitments.
- Fail to plan and conduct people change management work adequately.

Here's how project sponsors can challenge and coach project managers to avoid embarrassment and improve project performance.

Optimism bias

One common form of delusional behaviour is chronic optimism bias. While optimism is often framed as a leadership virtue, some project managers cross the line into believing that

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schedules, budgets, or risks will somehow resolve themselves positively despite clear evidence to the contrary. Behaviours that are warning signs include:

- Rejection of the team's task effort estimates as excessive.
- Repeated dismissal of the contents of the risk register.
- A tendency to label dissenting views as negative or not team-oriented.
- Attempts to bully the project team.

Excessively optimistic behaviour often persists even after multiple missed milestones. The underlying delusion is the belief that confidence alone can override structural constraints such as resource limits, technical complexity, or external dependencies.

Project sponsors can intervene with their project managers by:

- Expressing support for the team's determination while requesting more realistic status reporting.
- Asking for an objective update on the status of the risk register.
- Requesting a review of the project plan.
- Insisting that the project plan include mitigation tasks for high probability and impact risks.

Superhero

Delusional behaviour also appears in misplaced heroism. In this case, the project manager views themselves as the sole barrier to success, believing that personal effort can compensate for any and all project issues. Their long hours, constant escalation, and micromanagement of the project team are presented as exceptional commitment. Unfortunately, the real problems—unclear governance, insufficient team capacity and skills, or unrealistic scope—remain unaddressed.

When project sponsors observe this behaviour and the inevitable team burnout, they can intervene by:

- Ordering a one-week vacation for the entire team.
- Expressing appreciation for the extraordinary commitment, but pointing out that the behaviour is not sustainable.
- Asking for an assessment of the project team's capacity and skills.
- Requesting a review of the balance of the project plan.

Control delusion

A third manifestation is control delusion. Here, the project manager believes they have far more influence over work and outcomes than they realistically do. This delusion occurs more often in projects with one or more of the following characteristics that drive the critical path:

- Depending on multiple vendors for key deliverables or ongoing services.
- Operating in a highly regulated environment where regulatory approvals drive achievement of milestones.
- Experiencing project staff turnover due to headhunting for high-demand skills.
- Working in a political climate where access to resources or priorities changes.

The delusion appears when project managers exhibit this behaviour:

- Insisting on aggressive schedule or cost commitments without securing binding agreements.
- Publicly promising delivery dates that depend on factors outside their authority.
- Attempting to shift blame outward to vendors or stakeholders when issues inevitably arise.

Project sponsors can intervene with their project managers by:

- Requesting a review of the work status and associated remaining risks of every vendor deliverable.
- Confirming that the project plan accounts for the estimated elapsed time required for regulatory approvals.
- Coaching project managers about the futility of assigning blame.

Narrative fixation

Narrative fixation is another problematic pattern. Some project managers become emotionally invested in a particular narrative about the project's prominence. Phrases associated with such narratives include:

- A flagship initiative.
- A quick win.
- A template or guiding light for the future of the enterprise.
- A transformative initiative.

Once project managers establish this narrative, contrary evidence is filtered out. The project teams start to report metrics selectively, dashboards are overly simplified, and nuanced status updates are discouraged or ignored. Teams quickly learn that accuracy is less valued than alignment with the preferred storyline, leading to a dangerous erosion of transparency.

When project sponsors sense they're hearing more carefully crafted propaganda than facts, they can intervene with their project managers by:

- Requesting more straightforward and realistic status reporting.
- Insisting that the baseline in the project schedule should not shift from month to month.
- Insisting that the metrics being reported remain the same from month to month.
- Demanding that the project team quit revising the project scope without steering committee approval.

Conclusion

Addressing delusional behaviour requires intervention by project sponsors. Recognizing and correcting these patterns is essential for improving delivery reliability, preserving professional credibility, and ensuring that projects serve strategic intent rather than collective self-deception.

About the Author



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Yogi Schulz has over 40 years of experience in Information Technology across various industries. Yogi works extensively in the petroleum industry, selecting and implementing financial, production revenue accounting, land & contracts, and geotechnical systems. He manages projects arising from changes in business requirements, leveraging technology opportunities, and mergers and acquisitions. His specialties include IT strategy, web strategy, and systems project management.

Mr. Schulz regularly speaks to industry groups and writes a regular column for [IT World Canada](http://ITWorldCanada.com) and Engineering.com. He has written for Microsoft.com and the Calgary Herald. His writing focuses on project management and IT developments of interest to management. Mr. Schulz served on the Board of Directors of the PPDM Association for 20 years, until 2015. Learn more at <https://www.corvelle.com/>. He can be contacted at yogischulz@corvelle.com

His new book, co-authored by Jocelyn Schulz Lapointe, is "[A Project Sponsor's Warp-Speed Guide: Improving Project Performance](#)."