

Project Metrics

Getting the Most from Your Consultant

At my first meeting with a client when starting a project, I always ask the same question, “How will we measure success?” The usual response I get is a blank stare, followed eventually by something along the lines of, “Well, there’s a list of deliverables in your proposal.”

Confusing deliverables with the expected outcome of a project is a common mistake that is often encouraged by rigid contracting rules. But deliverables are merely a means to achieve an outcome of some sort. It is that expected outcome that should be the focus of your project, not the deliverables. To ensure you get that outcome you must be able to articulate what it is you want to achieve and identify metrics that will tell you when you’ve got the results you wanted.

Can we do that?

But aren’t the deliverables what I’ve agreed to provide? Yes and no. As I’ve mentioned in a [previous article](#), there is a difference between contractors who are task-oriented and bill by the hour and consultants who are results-oriented and paid by results.

Changing the list of deliverables can be difficult for contractors who have based their proposal on the expected hours they will devote to the project. As a subcontractor on a project, I once proposed the addition of a web-based survey to assist in gathering data we needed for the project. My project leader had to spend several hours recalculating the budget to make sure we could cover the additional costs, even though they were relatively minor.

A consultant who is paid by results should have no problems adding or deleting deliverables if doing so is consistent with project objectives and in the best interest of the client. Depending on the contract administrator this may need to be done in writing but since it does not affect the end result or the project cost, this generally is not a problem.

Rigid deliverables affect creativity

Why would you want to change the deliverables to which you’ve agreed? When you hire a consultant you’re getting the benefit of his or her wisdom, not just their services as a writer or facilitator. Since requests



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own company, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

for proposals are written without the consultant's input, the consultant may be able to suggest a better way of achieving the desired results. Being flexible on deliverables allows the consultant to offer more creative solutions.

Here's an example of what I mean. A national trade association asked me to help design an emergency plan template that would be unique to their industry. As part of the project, I reviewed articles from the association's trade journal and interviewed a number of key members. It turned out that because this was a mature trade with limited players, most of whom had been in business for a long time, there was little interest in a plan template.

Instead, we identified a need for a professional practices document against which members could measure their plan. This meant that the deliverables we had initially agreed upon were no longer valid. However, the new deliverable was still consistent with the project goal to improve the response capabilities of members and our project metric of acceptance and use of the document by members.

Developing metrics

Identifying your desired end state is not always easy precisely because of the focus on deliverables. For example, I'm frequently called in to help with emergency planning, with the principal deliverable being new or revised plan. But is the plan itself the really the desired output? Isn't the real point of this project better coordination among plan participants?

Ask yourself the question, "If this project is successful, what difference will it make?" Understanding the real purpose of your project allows you to make meaningful decisions on how you achieve that end. It lets you determine whether the deliverables you originally

requested will help you get the results you want.

If you can identify what it is you want to accomplish, the next logical question is, "How will I know if I've achieved the results I want?" This question can be answered both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The most common metric is quantitative and this is the reason so many projects rely on tangible deliverables to measure progress. If you have a document in hand, something must be getting done.

While there is a place for quantitative measures, the real determinant of success is often qualitative. How will your condition be better if the project is successful? Will you experience fewer complaints or see a reduction in interagency conflict? Will you save time by being better organized?

In the case of an emergency plan, the issue may be that no one follows the old plan and you want their support for a new one. Knowing this, a consultant can interview players and find out the problems with the old plans. You can then measure success by a survey of the key players. If your only metric is submission of a plan, you may not get the result you really want.

It doesn't work that way

In my experience, very few projects unfold as anticipated in the original RFP. Timelines change as real world priorities intrude. Participants change. This is why it critical to clearly identify your project goals and metrics at the beginning. It keeps you on track as things change. It also allows you to alter the methodologies used in the project without changing the outcome to achieve better results. In the long run, it gets you what you want. 