

# Compass

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 1

## Reasonable Expectations

*"If I can't disappoint anyone at the beginning, no one will be delighted at the end."*

by David A. Schmaltz

The Standish Group reports that only about 15% of all software projects meet expectations. In larger companies, fewer than 10% succeed. Even the completed ones end as shadows of their original requirements, retaining less than half of their specified features.

It's getting worse!



This study shows an epidemic of unreasonable expectations!

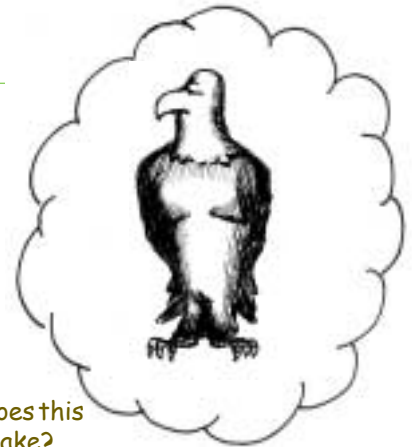
The most unreasonable expectations, and the probable source of these disappointing survey results, is the notion that expectations should seem reasonable.

When project managers ask me to show them how to create reasonable plans, I usually respond by saying, "It's sometimes unreasonable to expect a reasonable plan. First, consider whether this is a situation where it's reasonable to expect reasonable." Most of the 85% of projects reported as failures foolishly pursued reasonable-seeming objectives.

I'm not being cute when I say that expecting reasonable is often unreasonable. I'm trying to set reasonable expectations, and sometimes it's just delusional to expect reasonable to sound reasonable.

We all hope that our projects will unfold smoothly, but this desire can contaminate us, transforming, as in the Standish Group's report, normal complications into apparent catastrophes.

We usually barge ahead expecting reasonableness. Then, when complications arise, colored by our delusions, our experiences seem unreasonable. What kind of sense



What we, at the beginning, characterize as "only reasonable" can become absolutely absurd by the end. We end up accepting what seemed simply preposterous at the start, then we call this result a failure.

In high performance cultures, those uninfected people foolhardy enough to acknowledge normal complications (those actually trying to set reasonable expectations!) risk being labeled "pessimist." This threat effectively mums many usefully discouraging words.

The antidote for this contagion? I inoculate myself from the following list of unreasonable-seeming expectations! This injection unclouds my mind enough to remind me of some universal complications. Then, with my mind cleared, I help my community acknowledge these simple, usually invisible yet immutable facts of project life.

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**Reasonable Expectation One:**  
**It's not going to turn out the way we think it will turn out.**

Projects are more like conversations than they are like speeches. The real script is written in execution, no matter how thorough the planning.

The old writer's adage says, "The more satisfied you are when finishing the first draft, the more your work needs a major rewrite." I think the same holds true for setting expectations. The more confident I feel that I know how a project will unfold, the less likely it is to turn out that way. No one can tell you how it's going to unfold, and the expectation that someone should be able to tell is the very mother of unreasonableness.

The best we can say is, "It's not going to turn out like we think it will turn out."

**Reasonable Expectation Two:**  
**How we respond to discovering the depth of our initial naivete will be the key to our eventual success.**

Is our original plan a reasonable baseline for judging success? Our learnings should undermine our initial assumptions. The Standish Group's study assumes that initial plans are a reasonable measure of success, when our experience should tell us that they are unavoidably naive.

Punishing the map makers never helps. Neither does blaming the territory. We can guarantee only that our map will be wrong because no one can survey a project's territory before traversing it.

Our responses to these disparities builds the foundation for our success. Stiff-arming can defer the inevitable, but no one successfully

avoids it. Embracing our unsettling learnings creates solid foundations.

**Reasonable Expectation Three:**  
**You can have exactly what you want but never exactly how you thought you'd get it.**

The project's in serious trouble if the plan isn't changing. Sticking with the plan more often contributes to failure than success. We needlessly imprison our projects and ourselves when we forget that there are an infinite number of paths to our objective.

Your path toward your objective will inevitably shift. Staying on track is a reasonable thing for a railroad train to do and an absurd constraint for any trail blazer. More projects blaze trails than follow rails.

**Reasonable Expectation Four:**  
**No one can help you as much as you can help yourself.**

I would like to believe that I can help. My experience tells me, however, that the best I can do is help others help themselves.

I have never received a request to help someone help themselves. They ask for my help. We will both learn the truth about our capabilities before our engagement ends. There will always be this one difficult discovery for us to face.

Your desire to help will just be in the way unless you can acknowledge that it's rarely about you helping them. It's usually about them helping themselves.

**No Special Ability**

I have no special ability to find reason in the delusions that initiate projects. I have simply been observing. My experience has cultivated an acceptance of how unrea-

sonable my sensible-seeming plans become over time.

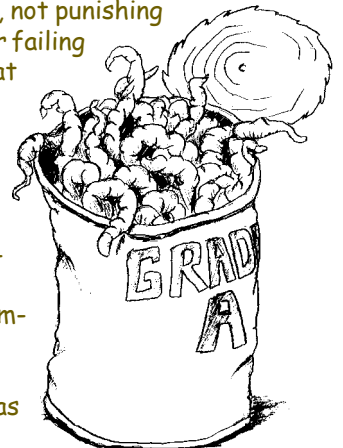
***There are perfect plans and perfect failures, but there are no perfect projects.***

Bright ideas inevitably mature into less alluring but nonetheless satisfying forms. Cans of worms can never be closed again. Still, it's essential that we open them up. Remember, just because it turns out differently doesn't mean that it turns out wrong.

Sometimes I'm reviled for my efforts, so this is never comfortable work for me. Still, accepting these truths has been a necessary ingredient of nearly every project success I've enjoyed.

I have no interest in raining on anyone's parade. I will pack an umbrella for myself and encourage others to bring one along for themselves, too. My weather forecasting chases some away. The ones who stay are usually surprised by the trip and delighted by the outcome. While my four unreasonable-seeming expectations can disappoint the exuberant at the beginning, I've learned that if I can't disappoint anyone at the beginning, no one will be delighted at the end.

Success is not simply a matter of making it turn out the way we expect. It's dealing with the world as it becomes, not punishing each other for failing to realize what we naively imagined it was supposed to become. If this seems like unreasonable criteria, the line of complaintants starts around the corner. das



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## eXposing True North's eXpose Conference!

This is your first of many exposures to True North pgs' planned **eXpose Conference**.

Ever noticed how little you learn on projects where everything goes as planned? Our most powerful lessons come from our greatest failures. Why, then, do most conferences feature well-scrubbed presenters posing with lessons from their greatest successes?

Shouldn't they feature trail-weary practitioners eXposing their hard-won truths?

We think it is time for a conference where we don't pose around our supposed successes. One that starts eXposing us to the lessons of our greatest teachers -- our failures!

We're designing the **eXpose Conference** for anyone who is tired of posing as if all their projects turn out the way they'd planned. This will be where you can stop posing and become an eX-poser instead.

Becoming an eX-poser means sharing your greatest failures, eXposing them to the light of conversation, disposing of the shame sometimes associated with them, and composing new stories for your most powerful lessons - while re-posing in a beautiful Pacific Northwest setting.

True North pgs' **eXpose Conference** will be held February 20-23, 2002 at McMennamin's Edgefield Manor outside of Portland, Oregon. Edgefield Manor was originally the county poor farm. It has been transformed into a remarkable bed and breakfast style destination resort. We couldn't imagine a better place to transform your own 'poor farm' stories into new richness.

By the end of the gathering, each attendee will have had the opportunity to openly discuss their real project experiences. Each will leave with a powerful set of tools for more successfully dealing with the realities of project life and for extracting the lessons from these powerful experiences. Each will also leave connected into a community dedicated to sharing their real stories about how projects work in the real world.

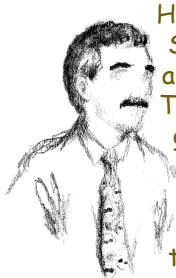
This will not be a grudge-fest or a blame-a-thon. We will not be searching for root causes or ultimate culpabilities. Together we will create a unique set of tools that will help us succeed in learning from our future projects, regardless of their outcome.

This is your first eXposure to our bright idea, a conference where the reality of project life is discussed and where real coping tools are shared.

Watch your email and paper mail for further announcements on the **eXpose Conference**. We hope we will be seeing you there. aas

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### David's Notes



Hello. I'm David A. Schmalz, founder and president of True North project guidance strategies, inc., and editor and publisher of this newsletter.

True North pgs has shifted into hyper-learning mode. This is a breath-taking experience. Of course, little is turning out as we expected it to turn out. When will we learn what most of our workshop attendees discover, that it turns out a lot better than we imagine? It almost always does!

For the details, the books we've been reading, and some of the more prominent learnings of our recent travels, see What's New at our website,

<http://www.projectcommunity.com>

and visit our Heretics' Forum:

<http://pc.wiki.net>

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### Appreciations

**Rick Gemereth** and his **Silo-Busters** for bustin' out!

**Jim Goughenour** and his **IT staff** for talking about what they're not supposed to talk about! Keep up the chatter, folks!

**Ray Gordon** for finding his guidance system! (This Scud's for you!)

**Anne Hathaway** for the Bazaar experience!

**Kathy Carey** for editing and **Wild-er Schmalz** for the graphics.

**Susan Scott** for wrestling with the Miracle Question!

**Amy Schwab** for eXposing her heart's desire.

**Susan Kind** for juggling against a wall.

**Mark Gray** for starting another conversation.

**Naomi Karten** for a most Chad-is-fying PSL experience.

**Mike Delgado** for asking for what he wanted (and getting it).

**Jim Huntzicker** and **Deborah Siscaretti** for arranging for us to share, with a hundred of their friends, the *Five Things That We Do To Destroy Our Own Projects*. das

## Notices:

If your organization has trouble with Unrealistic Expectations, consider enrolling!

For True North pgs' Mastering Projects Workshop Open Enrollment Schedule, see our web site- [www.projectcommunity.com](http://www.projectcommunity.com) for online registration and the most current schedules!

Consider, too enrolling in Problem Solving Leadership workshop. We are also planning a European Problem Solving Leadership workshop. Contact us at [tn@ix.netcom.com](mailto:tn@ix.netcom.com) for information.

## About *Compass*



*Compass* is published periodically by True North pgs, Inc., and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community.

*Compass* is a navigation tool for continuing your process of improving your project experience. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your project's community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences through sharing our stories and our insights.

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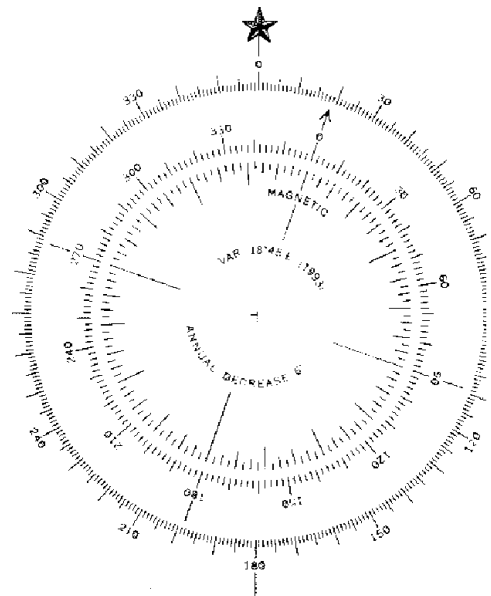
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