

FREE RESOURCE

The Estimate Conversation

Six exchanges that damage product–engineering relationships, and what to say instead. Word for word.

Drawn from X1 · Managing Expectations Across the Boundary

These are the six conversations that go wrong most often, in every company I have worked in. None of them go wrong because people are difficult. They go wrong because both sides are answering a different question from the one being asked.

The scripts below are meant to be said, not read. Change the words until they sound like you — but keep the shape, because the shape is what does the work.

01

“How long will it take?”

SITUATION You need a date. They need not to be held for ever to a number invented under pressure in a meeting.

USUALLY SAID “A couple of weeks?” — a guess, offered as a guess, and heard as a commitment.

“I can give you three numbers. If what we know holds, about two weeks. If the two things I am unsure about go badly, about five. Plan on three, and I will tell you by Thursday which way the unknowns went.”

WHY IT WORKS A range with a review date turns a guess into a plan. The person asking almost never needed a single number — they needed to know when they would know.

02

“We need to refactor first.”

SITUATION Engineering wants to spend real time on something with no visible output.

USUALLY SAID “We need to refactor the payments module.” — heard as “we would like to do engineering instead of work”.

“Payments takes about three days for a change that should take one. That is roughly a week a month we are losing. Two weeks of work takes it back to about a day. I would rather do it before the Q3 work than during it.”

WHY IT WORKS Names the interest, the principal and the deadline. That is an investment case rather than a preference, and it can be argued with on its merits.

03

“Can we just...”

SITUATION Something that sounds small, asked casually, usually at the end of a meeting.

USUALLY SAID “Sure.” — followed by three weeks nobody planned for.

“Probably — let me tell you what ‘just’ involves so you can decide whether it is worth it. It touches the billing table, so it needs a migration, so it needs a deploy window. That is about four days. The display-only version is an afternoon. Which do you actually need?”

WHY IT WORKS It does not say no. It offers a cheaper real option and hands the decision back to the person who owns the priority — which is where it belonged.

04

Saying no.

SITUATION A reasonable request that you cannot do, from someone who is not being unreasonable.

USUALLY SAID “It’s not a priority right now.” — heard, accurately, as “you do not matter”.

“Not this quarter. Here is what would have to come out for it to go in — and if you would rather have this than that, I will make the swap. Otherwise the earliest I can start is October.”

WHY IT WORKS Converts a refusal into a trade. Most requests are withdrawn once the cost is named by the person making them, and the relationship survives it.

05

The escalation.

SITUATION You need someone above you to decide, and you need it this week.

USUALLY SAID A message describing the problem. Four clarifying questions come back. Two days pass.

“One: we cannot ship the reporting change and the migration in the same sprint. Two: I would drop reporting — it slips two weeks and nobody outside notices. Three: the cost is that Sales has promised it to one account. Four: I need a decision by Friday, or the choice gets made for us.”

WHY IT WORKS Situation, recommendation, cost, deadline. An escalation without a recommendation is not an escalation — it is a delegation of your own job.

06

The slip.

SITUATION You are going to be late, and you already know it.

USUALLY SAID Telling them on the deadline, when there is nothing anyone can do.

“We are going to miss the 14th — it will be the 28th. I am telling you two weeks early rather than two days, so you have time to change what you tell people. Here is what happened, and here is the one thing that would have caught it sooner.”

WHY IT WORKS The lateness is rarely the damage. Being surprised is. Early bad news buys back most of the credibility a slip would otherwise cost you.

The seventh conversation, which is new

There is now an exchange that did not exist three years ago: the one where everybody assumes the machine made it faster.

Sometimes it did. The first draft is quicker — noticeably, sometimes dramatically. But review did not get quicker; it got more important, because plausible-and-wrong is now the default failure mode rather than obviously-broken. The work moved rather than disappeared.

WHEN SOMEONE SAYS IT SHOULD BE FASTER NOW

“The writing is faster. The deciding is not — and the deciding was always most of it. What has actually changed is that I can show you three options by Thursday instead of one.”

The rule underneath all seven

Every script on these pages does the same thing: it replaces a number with a trade-off, and hands the decision to whoever owns the priority.

You are not being asked to predict the future. You are being asked to make the cost visible enough that someone can choose. That is a much easier job, and you are already qualified to do it.

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