Starting With Rolling Wave Planning

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Some project managers considering moving to iterative, incremental, or agile lifecycles, stumble when it comes time to move to rolling wave planning. They aren’t sure how to start it, how to continue it, or how to see where the project is without using a more traditional Gantt chart and planning the whole project in advance. But for me, it was the easiest practice to start, because I knew the Gantt chart was the one way the project would not happen. No matter how good the project team’s estimate was, some events would prevent them from completing the project the way they originally estimated.

A rolling wave plan is a continuous detailed schedule that’s only a few weeks long. As you complete one week of detailed schedule, you add another week to the end of the schedule. With a four-week rolling wave schedule, I never have less than four weeks of detailed schedule, and I never have more than four weeks of detailed schedule.

I choose a four-week rolling wave schedule for two reasons. If I’m not managing a project with defined two-week iterations, less than two weeks is not enough detail for me to foresee risks. A schedule that’s more than four weeks long tends to be wrong the farther out we schedule, so I don’t bother trying.

If you’ve never tried rolling wave planning, here’s how to start. Find a large-enough room to organize the schedule on the wall or on a whiteboard. Lay out your major milestones on yellow stickies, moving from left to right. Then ask the project team to join you in the room.

Explain to the team that instead of trying to develop the entire project schedule in detail all at once, you’ve identified when you want to reach the major milestones, as noted by the yellow stickies on the wall. Now, ask the question for the first milestone: “What will it take us to reach this milestone?” Then ask the project staff to write down their tasks and interdependencies on stickies, one task to a sticky.

I find it easiest to ask people to plan in inch-pebbles. Inch-pebbles are one- to two-day tasks that are either done or not done. Since the project manager can’t assign inch-pebbles to people, each member of the project staff has to understand his or her own tasks in detail and develop inch-pebbles to complete those tasks.

If the project staff isn’t able to plan in inch-pebbles, ask them to tell you how you will understand their progress. Thinking in inch-pebbles is not easy for some people, and they will need time to learn how to break their work into smaller and smaller pieces.

If you must make a Gantt chart, copy the contents of each sticky into your favorite project scheduling tool. Each week, as you meet with each person on the project team, you can ask them to tell you their next set of tasks, and you can update the schedule. If the people need help with their interdependencies, bring everyone together again and let them discuss their issues.

As long as you keep each milestone in mind as you proceed, you’ll find that the schedule is easier to maintain and that you spend less time with the schedule, enabling you to spend more time with the project team.

Rolling wave planning isn’t a panacea for understanding the true state of the project and planning how to achieve the next milestone, but it’s a great way to start.