

# Taming the “Squishy Scope”: Why Clarity Beats Comfort in IT Project Leadership

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**“I intentionally want to keep the scope squishy.”**

That single sentence, spoken by a senior stakeholder early in an enterprise IT initiative, has stuck with me for years. It wasn't meant to be reckless — it was framed as a strategy. The idea was to encourage flexibility, enable innovation, and prevent over-engineering something too early. In theory, it was about keeping options open. In practice, it was a leadership red flag.

As technology leaders, we're often asked to embrace agility, stay responsive, and “meet the business where they are.” But there's a difference between agility and ambiguity. What this stakeholder called “squishy,” I recognized as strategically undefined — and a direct threat to project success.

## The Real Risk Behind Vague Scope

Let's be honest: in IT, scope isn't just a list of features. It's a fundamental management tool. It's how we allocate resources, align teams, set budgets, plan architectures, and measure success. If the scope is soft, everything else is at risk.

I've seen the downstream effects too many times: projects with blurred timelines, teams unsure of priorities, stakeholders disappointed by the very flexibility they once requested. Ironically, the intent to “leave things open” often leads to misalignment, friction, and deliverables that miss the mark.

So how do you push back — professionally, constructively — when a key stakeholder wants ambiguity?

## Lead the Conversation, Don't Just Facilitate It

The most effective CIOs and program leaders don't simply accept business requests at face value — they challenge them to align better with long-term strategy and operational reality.

When faced with the “squishy scope” challenge, I took three critical actions:

### 1. Reframe the Discussion Around Outcomes

I redirected the conversation away from features and deliverables toward business impact.

“What does success look like for you, six months from now? What changes in the business because this project was delivered?”

By anchoring the discussion in desired outcomes — not tasks — the stakeholder began to clarify what really mattered. This helped prioritize high-value work and exposed which vague ideas could safely move to a future phase.



## 2. Design for Flexibility, Not Vagueness

Agility doesn't mean working without a plan. It means building with purposeful adaptability. I proposed a phased delivery model:

- **Phase 1:** Clearly defined scope aligned to immediate business needs
- **Phase 2+:** Placeholder functionality, gated by decision checkpoints and real-world feedback

This gave the stakeholder room to evolve the vision, while providing the team with the clarity they needed to execute efficiently now.

## 3. Establish Lightweight Change Governance

Change isn't the enemy — unmanaged change is. I introduced a transparent change control process, light on bureaucracy but firm on accountability. Every proposed change was assessed for its impact on time, cost, and risk. This didn't slow down the team — it empowered decision-makers with visibility and control.

The result? Clear scope, focused delivery, and a stakeholder who felt heard and supported. More importantly, we protected the integrity of the team's time and the credibility of IT.

### The Hidden Cost of Ambiguity: Team Morale

There's another reason why clarity matters: people.

Talented professionals want to know what they're working toward. When the scope is constantly shifting or undefined, frustration builds. Morale drops. Teams feel like they're running in place — or worse, running in circles.

By defining scope — even temporarily — you're not limiting creativity. You're giving your team the structure they need to thrive.

### Rewriting the Narrative on Scope

In some circles, "scope" has become a dirty word — associated with rigidity, waterfall thinking, or lack of innovation. That's a false narrative.

Well-managed scope is not a limitation. It's a **leadership tool**.

It provides:

- **Direction** for your teams
- **Confidence** for your stakeholders
- **Credibility** for IT as a strategic partner



n today's environment — where digital transformation is constant, and executive patience is short — CIOs and IT leaders cannot afford the cost of “squishy” anything. We must lead with clarity, backed by flexible models that adapt intelligently.

## Final Thoughts: The CIO as Clarity Champion

Your business stakeholders don't always know what they need. That's okay. It's our job to help them find out — by asking the right questions, providing the right structure, and turning ambiguity into action.

When someone says, “Let's keep the scope squishy,” they may not realize they're inviting risk. But you do. And your leadership — not just your technical skills — is what makes the difference.

***In IT, clarity doesn't kill innovation. It unlocks it.***

### What Makes our Projects and Solutions Successful?

We ensure every project and solution is built on a solid foundation that integrates key project success factors.

 <b>Strategic Portfolio Management</b> We help organizations select and manage projects as a cohesive portfolio—aligned to strategic goals, optimized for resource capacity, and designed to maximize impact.	 <b>Consistent Project Methodologies</b> Whether using Waterfall, Agile, or a hybrid model, we equip teams with the right frameworks to successfully deliver projects.	 <b>Scope, Schedule &amp; Budget Management</b> Through structured planning and expert consulting, we partner with internal teams to establish clear baselines, define achievable deliverables, and apply best practices that promote consistency and control.
 <b>Project Organizational Change Management (OCM)</b> We partner with teams to build a clear, actionable OCM strategy—from stakeholder analysis and communications to training and sustainment—ensuring change is embraced and project benefits are fully realized.	 <b>Issues, Risks, Action Items</b> We help teams move beyond reactive checklists by establishing disciplined, forward-looking processes. From early identification to ownership and resolution, we turn uncertainty into opportunity and keep projects moving forward with confidence.	
 <b>Standard Templates for Consistent Delivery</b> We deliver proven, ready-to-use templates that support every phase of the project lifecycle—promoting efficiency, transparency, and delivery excellence.	 <b>Project Communication</b> We help teams establish and sustain an actionable Communications Plan—defining the appropriate strategy, audiences, messaging, timing, and delivery methods. We ensure communication is purposeful, timely, and aligned to every project's success.	

