My son Tim and I had been trying to plan a game of miniature golf after work for several days, but a persistent storm system over most of Illinois, bringing rain and sometimes strong winds, had so far prevented us from visiting the green felt links of our local Putt-Putt. I bought a special Mickey Mouse set of golf clubs for him last Christmas, and he seemed to enjoy swinging them in the back yard when the weather allowed, and in the basement when the weather didn’t. The first week of April brought mild temperatures, and on the first sunny day I took Tim to play his first round of miniature golf. In my opinion, he putted fairly well for a youngster, although I wasn’t sure if he enjoyed putting the ball into the hole as much as through the clown’s nose or over the bumps and hills. I hoped he wouldn’t be disappointed when he went to his first real golf course and found no windmill or concrete banks off of which to bounce his ball.

I was telling the story of our day on the miniature links to Marketing Manager Bailey Jenkins, who had been working with Ashley on the marketing information database project. Ashley and I had met a few times to discuss this project, but I had never met with Bailey before. She was really into meditation and I remember hearing nature CDs playing in her office when I would go over and visit with Ashley. When I asked Ashley about it, she said Bailey liked to meditate over her lunch hour.

“I tell you, Bailey, he might just be the next Arnold Palmer!” I said, finishing my story about Tim and miniature golfing.

Bailey flashed a smile that said she appreciated the story, but had no idea who Arnold Palmer was. I decided to put the “putter talk” aside and focus on project management.

“Bailey, it’s always a pleasure for me to get to meet with our client managers. How can I help you?”

“The vice president of marketing has a lot of interest in making sure this marketing information database is implemented successfully,” Bailey began.
"He has given us the necessary time, but he has also made it very clear he doesn't want to hear excuses if it goes in late. I think Ashley is doing a good job, especially given the confusion that occurred when our old vice president was transferred. I guess I'm nervous because of the high visibility. We cannot afford to fail."

I acknowledged Bailey's nervousness. "That's a natural feeling, Bailey. In fact, you and Ashley are both on the hook for the success of this project. If there are problems, the VP is going to look to you for answers. It won't be good enough to say Ashley was the project manager and it was her responsibility."

"That's exactly my point," Bailey agreed, taking a deep breath. "The VP put me in charge of this project to make sure we hit our project budget and deadline. However, most of my background is in the finance area. I reviewed the business requirements document created by the project team, but I don't have the expertise to evaluate the information. I want to be able to track the project adequately without getting involved in the details, but I don't know what questions to ask."

"It's hard for functional managers to be subject matter experts for every project in the organization," I said. "Your VP shouldn't expect you to have that level of knowledge. However, there are questions you can ask to make sure projects are proceeding as expected. These questions are part of your quality assurance role."

Managers want to delegate responsibility and autonomy to project managers, but they know they also retain a level of responsibility if the project is in trouble or fails. This level of accountability runs up to the sponsor as well. Projects that fail or overrun their budgets and deadlines also reflect poorly on the sponsor and, to varying degrees, on all other management stakeholders.

So, it is not surprising a sponsor, functional manager, or other high-level individual wants to understand the status of a project. Of course, they can read status reports, but they are pretty much taking the project manager's word on the status. In many cases, the status reports are so vague it is hard to know for sure what is going on.

So how do managers have a better idea as to the status of a project? They could review the documentation being prepared, but most managers are not experts in the business aspects of all the projects in their