

Deadlines

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I was having a discussion about deadlines with one of my students the other day, and it got me thinking about these strange things in our lives. They have a bigger impact on the quality of our lives than we realize, but most people seem to accept deadlines without challenging them. This article will put the spotlight on deadlines and suggest some ways we can handle them a little better. I come at the topic from four different perspectives: 1) the arbitrary nature of deadlines, 2) self imposed deadlines, 3) deadlines set by others for us, and 4) setting deadlines for others successfully.

First, let's realize that most deadlines are arbitrary dates without real substantive factual backing. For example, say your senior manager sets a deadline for the budget to be submitted by the end of the month. Will the world really stop turning if the budget is submitted later than that? I doubt it.

In reality, many deadlines are set so a higher level deadline (equally arbitrary) can be met. In the example above, the senior manager may need to have the budget in time to roll it up with a corporate level budget that somebody decided needs to be finished by the end of the quarter.

There are some fiscal hurdles in certain situations that give the deadlines more of a real feel, but when you hold them up to the light, you can see that nearly all of them are based on someone's desire that could be changed if it was really necessary.

If you use the "Five Why" technique with any deadline, you are sure to come up with some eye-opening conclusions. Simply ask why something must be done by a certain date, and when you get the answer, ask why that is the case. Do that five times, and you will usually find that the specific deadline is not as firm as it appears. The answer to one of the last "why" questions is likely to be, "because we have always done it that way," or maybe "because that is the way the boss likes it."

What I am saying is that the pressure to meet most deadlines is something organizations usually impose on themselves. On the flip side, deadlines are an essential

ingredient for having things work as intended. Imagine if there were no deadlines at all. Precious little work would get done, because human beings have a remarkable ability to procrastinate from doing things that are not fun. I think self-imposed deadlines can be helpful. Many of us impose personal deadlines that are figments of our imagination so we can accomplish the things we want in life.

I impose deadlines on myself all the time. It is a habit called “operating ahead of the power curve.” If I have a presentation to give in four weeks, I will convince myself that it needs to be given next week. It is a self-imposed deadline to get the presentation prepared. It then sits in my computer for a few weeks before the presentation. Actually, I am still subconsciously working on it and “polishing the edges,” so the ultimate quality of the presentation is much better than if it was presented when initially completed. There is intentional pressure on myself at the start to get the presentation done, then I can relax and not be in a panic just ahead of the due date.

The same philosophy is true with writing. As I am typing this article, there are five articles in the queue, all ready to publish, so this particular one will not get published for six weeks. In the meantime, my beloved wife will help me make it more worthy of the reader’s attention, and I will think about it a few times more before going to press. My personal deadline to get this article done is today, but it will not be published on my blog for six weeks.

The deadlines set **by other people** generally cause the most stress in our lives. This is especially true if the person or organization setting the deadlines has a history of being unreasonable, rigid, or confusing with them. When you think of it, most people are juggling several deadlines on any given day and trying to sort through the different priorities.

To lower the stress of deadlines, make sure you have a firm agreement with the person imposing them and arrive at a reasonable priority for this work in addition to everything else on your plate. If the task seems unreasonable, try to negotiate some leeway or some assistance, and express that you want the time to ensure a quality job. If it becomes apparent you will miss a deadline, let the person who gave it to you know well in advance. It is much easier to work through an alternate path if the problem is surfaced in a calm manner before the deadline. If you wait until after the deadline to share the shortfall, all of the “reasons” you give will appear to be flimsy excuses, and you will lose credibility.

People instinctively know that getting things done on time is a prerequisite for advancement, so they really try to please, even if it means becoming nervous wrecks. When conflicting deadlines occur, either for one person or between people trying to work together, it is a formula for dysfunctional conflict. Managers who establish

deadlines **for other people** need to be careful that they are reasonable, clear, and not in conflict with other deliverables.

Here are some suggestions that may be helpful for setting deadlines for employees at work:

1. If there is a true need for something to be done at a particular time, state the reason when giving the deadline so people know it is not simply an arbitrary date.
2. When possible, give people a voice in establishing the goal for when work will be completed. Participating in the setting of a deadline makes it personal, so it becomes much more palatable.
3. Make the deadlines visible with some sort of chart or notes to back up the validity and avoid confusion.
4. Ensure the specific deliverable is crystal clear and not subject to interpretation. This level of clarity will avoid hard feelings later on.
5. Establish some milestones along the way, so people can experience progress toward the final submission.
6. Celebrate a job well done and let people know you are grateful for their efforts to meet the deadline.
7. Coach people who habitually fall short of deadlines and help them with more specific targets in the future. Let them know that demonstrating a solid track record of meeting expectations is really going to help their own standing.
8. Be flexible when possible so that changing priorities and conditions do not put undue pressure on people. Be alert to the signs of people feeling trapped by deliverables that are not really possible.

Working with deadlines is something we all do. When we seek to establish deadlines at work, following the above tips will reduce some of the problems we encounter.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* (2003), 2. *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online* (2006), 3. *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind* (2009), and 4. *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763**



