



## Negotiating Deadlines

A challenging part of every professional's working life is managing timeframes. One of the interesting dimensions of that challenge is how deadlines are negotiated and agreed. You see, I think that some of the stress that many people experience when they are working towards tight timeframes could have been avoided if they had put more thought into the deadlines adopted at the start of the task or project. Here are some thoughts on negotiating timeframes that may help reduce your stress levels....

There is an important assumption that I need to table right at the start. I am assuming that you believe that you have some power to negotiate. In other words, I am assuming that you will have some say in determining the deadline. This may be obvious but, sadly, I hear many people feeling helpless in this regard. "I have to deliver when the boss says." "I am stuck with what our client demands." "We've got to meet our service standards". If you hear yourself saying words like these – and denying yourself a say in the timeframe – I would recommend that you test them. It may be true. Then again, it may not be true and you may be simply consigning yourself to victim status rather than taking responsibility for your plans.

If you do have some power to negotiate then we can move on to three principles:

1. The timeframe must be realistic. It sounds simple but in my experience human beings have a strong bias towards optimism. I would strongly recommend some buffer time.
2. Where possible, under promise and over deliver. Let's say it's Monday and you think you can deliver on Wednesday morning. Now imagine that you actually deliver on Wednesday. Now consider these two scenarios: in the first case you promised to deliver on Tuesday and in the second case you promised to deliver on Thursday. In which case are both parties happy?
3. The timeframe should be clearly understood by both parties. Confirmation of the understanding would be valuable, either in an engagement letter (if it is with a client) or via email (if it is with someone in your team).

When it comes to actually negotiating the timeframe here are some tips:

- Think carefully about who goes first in the negotiation. In some circumstances you may wish to propose a date and in other circumstances it may be beneficial to hear their request first. Choose wisely...
- If the other party seems to have demanded an unrealistic deadline, rather than be defensive, be curious and politely enquire as to their rationale or needs. That insight may be useful in the subsequent negotiation.



- Be conscious of, and clarify with the other party, any important dependencies. There may be a third party involved, for example, or a reliance on receiving additional information.
- Remember not to constrain your bargaining to a single dimension (ie time). Think about other options to include in your negotiating. For example, you may offer a draft or an executive summary in order to meet their deadline. It may be that even a verbal report can satisfy their urgency addiction.
- Be careful not to be a slave to your perfectionist streak. You will never have enough time to get it exactly, perfectly, 100% correct. You may need to be “commercial”.

It is also worth remembering that if you encounter a problem that threatens the achievement of the agreed timeframe then it will be important to inform your client as soon as possible. (See my column on “Delivering Bad News”, October 2009).

What are the benefits of agreeing sound timeframes with your clients? I think that you will have greater confidence in the quality of your work if it is produced in a sensible timeframe. I think that your stress levels will be reduced if you avoid unnecessary dependence on adrenalin to get your work completed. Perhaps more importantly, I think there is great potential for improved relationships with your clients if you can get this right. They will feel respected and appreciated if you give them a say and can conduct a mature conversation on delivery times. They will, in turn, be appreciative if you keep them informed.

It takes maturity to negotiate and agree sensible timeframes – but the benefit is that you can enhance the enjoyment of your business life.