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Negotiating With Your Boss

BY TOM GOSSELIN

YOUR BOSS HANDS YOU AN URGENT PROJECT—DUE YESTERDAY. BUT THE STACK IN YOUR IN-BOX IS ALREADY A FOOT HIGH AND LAST WEEK'S "URGENT PROJECTS" ARE STILL UNFINISHED. HERE'S A TECHNIQUE FOR GETTING THE TIME AND RESOURCES YOU NEED TO GET EVERYTHING DONE—WITHOUT SPENDING ALL WEEKEND AT THE OFFICE.

You're sitting in your office on a Friday afternoon. You already have more work than you can handle. The company's downsizing has left you with fewer resources to get it all done; budget constraints and a head-count freeze do nothing to help.

Now your boss walks in and tells you, "I know you're loaded down right now, but I need this project by Monday. I wish I could give you more time, but the VP is really hot on this. You've always come through for me before; I know I can depend on you."

You are frustrated. The new demands mean that you won't be able to do your best on any of your work. You'll miss the deadlines on your other projects, which means not only disappointing clients, but also putting yourself at risk with the boss for failing to deliver.

What do you do? You know you're overloaded. You feel anger and frustration, but what good does that do? So you say, "I'll fit it in somehow." Then you work all weekend, missing out on time with your family and a ball game you'd planned to watch.

On Monday you submit a draft, which sits on your boss's desk until Friday, when the boss finally reviews it. Then you have to make all the changes by the following Monday.

So why did you accept the assignment in the first place, if you knew that everything else, including your personal life, would suffer? Did you feel that you couldn't say "no" because you wanted to look good? Did you refrain from saying what you really wanted to say, fearing that you might lose a job you otherwise enjoy? Did you think "no" was the only other option?

What will you say the next time the boss hits you with a last-minute request? You may have options you haven't considered.

Looking at tasks

Every task can be broken down into three factors:

- specifications—what someone wants done
- time—how long the task will take
- resources—what you need in order to get it done.

Specifications can be verbal or written. They can be casual requests or detailed descriptions. For example, the time frame may involve a rough mental estimate to start with, or a detailed step-by-step flowchart.

If you're like most people, when a task is specified, you make mental and sometimes written estimates of the time it will take you to do it—and the equipment, money, people and information you'll need. A task doesn't exist in a vacuum. You're probably working on various other tasks—some of them urgent. You'll have to adjust the time and resources you've allocated to them, if you are somehow going to fit in this new task.

Perhaps the best way to visualize the situation is with a triangle of fixed area. Obviously, if the total area is fixed, any change to one side means an adjustment to one or both of the other sides. Let's call one side "time" and the second side "resources." The base is "specifications."

Let's assume that your boss assigns you a project. You estimate that it will take you 10 days to complete, with the help of two assistants. But your boss wants the completed project in five days.

In other words, you're being asked to cut the "time" leg of the

triangle in half. The only way you can do that and retain the same total area is to lengthen one or both of the other legs—the ones for resources and specifications.

That means you have two options: You can get the boss either to provide more resources or to adjust the specifications. That could mean, for instance, an agreement to add staff in order to get the work done on time, or an agreement to accept partial delivery of the project by the specified deadline.

Handling the situation

If we are to function effectively under such pressures, we must learn to negotiate. Six practical steps for negotiating with your boss and internal customers can help you manage tasks and projects successfully without feeling that you are constantly behind schedule:

- Allow a reasonable amount of time for a high-quality job.
- Determine the specifications for a task.
- Build in a contingency reserve.
- Use resources creatively.
- Know which factor drives each project.
- Learn to say, "Yes, and..." rather than "No."

Let's look at each step in detail.

Allow reasonable time. Tim is a brilliant design engineer working in a medium-sized firm. He often makes promises to clients about when he'll deliver designs, but he frustrates himself by not leaving enough time to meet his own standards.

Lately, many of Tim's designs have had to be redrafted because of sloppy work. When he does the work well, he is often late in delivery. But he is the one who sets the deadlines!

The problem is that Tim tends to overestimate his ability to deliver.

Does that sound like you? Restrain your optimism. Become a tough and realistic estimator. Make accurate estimates of what it takes to do a job and don't commit yourself beyond your capabilities.

Determine the specifications. Take the time to determine what the boss or client wants. It's not always obvious; you may have to ask questions to get to the heart of the matter. Don't let diffidence or shyness get in the way.

Look at Hester's case. Hester generates several key management reports each month. Her boss recently requested an additional summary report. Reluctant to appear ignorant or press her boss too hard, Hester gleaned a superficial understanding of what the boss wanted and then worked for a month to reprogram the system. When she presented the new report format, the boss replied, "This is interesting, but it's not at all what I expected!" It took Hester several tries to get it right.

Hester could have saved herself all of that wasted work by asking her boss to specify clearly what was expected for the new report format. And she would have made a better impression by getting it right the first time.

Build in a contingency reserve. Give yourself room to adapt to changing conditions. For instance, a person you thought would work with you may suddenly be pulled off the project, or a task might simply take longer than you expected. Most people fail to build in any slack and then are forced to renegotiate.

Use resources creatively. Your company's priorities change daily. Some projects get dropped, added, accelerated, or ranked differently in importance. When changes occur, you have the right to revise your original estimates and ask for more time or resources. Provide options to the boss or internal clients, such as changing a schedule or hiring consultants or temporary help for the short-term overload.

Know which factor drives the project. Often, one or more of a task's components are fixed and cannot be changed. Tasks that are structured this way are known as "one-factor" projects.

- Specification-fixed tasks cannot be changed, but you may be able to adjust the time and resources involved. For instance, Fran is a quality controller at a pharmaceutical firm. Her vaccines must meet high quality standards, so specification is likely to be an unbending factor.
- Time-fixed tasks are deadline driven. For example, Fred, the manufacturing manager at a major brewery, agreed to do a special run for a sales promotion on SuperBowl Sunday. But he estimated the machine time too tightly. One of the production lines went down, and several key markets did not receive the product in time to coincide with the advertising. Fred lost his job.
- Resource-fixed tasks are keyed to the availability of money, staff, or other resources. For example, Miguel works in human resources for a manufacturing company. With many of his projects, he can take as much time as he needs, as long as he stays within his budget.

Once you know which factor is fixed, you can adjust the other two factors. For example, if a task is specification-fixed, you can ask for more time, more resources, or both. If it is time-fixed, you can offer partial fulfillment—thus changing the specifications—or you can ask for more resources. If the task is resource-fixed, you can change the specifications or extend the time.

Learn to say "Yes, and..." rather than "No." Instead of saying "No," say "Yes, and here's what the cost or results will be...." In other words, test the deadline, budget, or specification constraints. How strong are they? How much "give" is there? You may be surprised.

Here are typical questions that could be used to test the three factors:

- Specification—"If we can't deliver a final draft with firm figures by the deadline, can we give you a preliminary draft with estimated numbers?"
- Time—"Are you saying that there is no way we can extend this deadline?"
- Resources—"If I understand you correctly, there are no conditions

under which you would pay for outside help on this."

Another helpful approach uses "if/then" trade-offs. Offer something else in return for what you ask. Here are a few examples of ways to see whether seemingly fixed factors can actually be adjusted:

- Specification-fixed tasks—"If you go from four colors to three colors on the layout, it will cost you $300 less in printing and two fewer hours of set-up time."
- Time-fixed tasks—"If you can extend the schedule one more day, we can deliver the extra 3,000 units."
- Resource-fixed tasks—"If I can subcontract the assembly, I can guarantee high-quality results, on time."

"Before" and "after" dialogues

Here is a real-life example of what happened when one employee negotiated with her boss. The first script shows a typical encounter before she learned to negotiate; the "after" dialogue reflects her use of negotiation techniques. Frank is the boss and Renee is the employee.

Frank: I need you in Pittsburgh tomorrow to investigate the damage at our plant.

Renee: But, Frank, I'm working on several cases in Florida right now.

Frank: I wish it could be different. You'll just have to squeeze it in somehow! Let me know how it goes.

Renee: Why is it always like this, Frank? I guess I have no choice, but this is really going to be a stretch.

Frank: I promise I'll never do it to you again.

Renee (under her breath): I bet.

Now, here is a sample of the new dialogue between the manager and employee, after Renee has learned to use negotiation techniques.

Frank: I need you in Pittsburgh tomorrow to investigate the damage at our plant.

Renee: It sounds like that's top priority. As you know, I'm working on several Florida projects right now. If you really need me in Pittsburgh, I have some suggestions. For example, we could assign an extra person to Florida, and alert the Pittsburgh office that I'll need a local person to work with me tomorrow. (EXPAND RESOURCES.)

Frank: That might work. What are your other ideas?

Renee: If the extra resources aren't available, then let's let the schedule on the Florida tasks slip by a week. (EXTEND THE TIME.)

Frank: We could, but those jobs are critical.

Renee: The only other time I have is the time I'm spending on the standardization task force. You could assign that job to someone else. (CHANGE SPECIFICATIONS.)

Frank: Let me check out those options. I'll call you in half an hour.

A half-hour later—

Frank: I put John on the task force to free you up for Pittsburgh. Let me know how it goes. Is it a deal?

Renee: It's a deal! I'll keep you posted.

Notice what the employee did. She had a problem: Her boss wanted her to handle a task that exceeded

her available time and resources. Her solution was to offer the boss several options for getting the task done.

You can adapt Renee's strategy to fit your own situation. What you're actually saying to your boss is this: "Yes, I can do it, and here's what it will cost. Either we must change the schedule, or we must allocate some additional resources, or we must change the specifications of what I'm working on."

To do that properly, you need information. First, determine what the boss or client wants. Break the job down according to its fixed and flexible components. Use a triangle diagram if that helps you think more clearly. Then make realistic estimates of how long the task would take if nothing were changed, and of how changing the specifications, time, or resources would affect completion of it.

State a clear time frame to the boss. You should be able to say, "I've estimated that the project you want will take me three weeks, with the resources I have now," keeping in mind the time you need to spend on your other work. Remind the boss of the projects you are already working on.

Review the necessary resources—including, for example, computer time, personnel, and information needed to complete the project.

Then indicate that you are willing to make a trade-off. For example, tell the boss that you can complete the work within the stated time frame, if the boss can give you the resources necessary to do the job. This kind of give-and-take is straightforward and easy to do. Everybody wins, and nobody loses.

Negotiation is the key. The alternative? You can say nothing, grit your teeth, and work all weekend. ■

Tom Gosselin *is with the Catalyst Group, Duxbury, Massachusetts. Reach him through Edward Feit at Market Support Services, 9 Eaton Court, Amherst, MA 01002.*

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