

Pushing for production

Communication is key to getting results

Question:

I work with a colleague who doesn't honor his commitments. He'll agree to a deadline. It passes, and then I have to negotiate to get the work done. He doesn't report to me so I can't fire him. How do I negotiate a different outcome?

Response:

It's sad in this era of high performance that people retain their positions even when they are the cause of bottleneck. At the same time, it's important to assess whether expectations have been clearly defined and understood.

We know that different people have different definitions of what "being on time" means. For some, being 15 minutes early for an appointment is "on time." For others, arriving right as the clock strikes the hour hand is "on time." Still others find it acceptable to be 5 minutes late.

To ensure that expectations and accountability are clearly defined and understood by all parties, try this 4-step process (WWWA for short). I use it for both my personal and professional relationships. It's simple to implement and doesn't require additional facilitation training.

1. Who. Define who will be accountable for each task. Someone has to be in charge otherwise, you will end up with a lot of talk and little of the right action which may lead to a good game of finger pointing – "he said, she said" – rather than results.

It's a good habit to end every conversation or meeting with a discussion about follow up: What action is required? What tasks need to be completed? Who has

assumed, or been delegated, the responsibility for what? The deadlines must be met.

2. What. For accountability to work, people need to know what is expected of them and when they must deliver. This is particularly important when the task is complex and requires input from different team members. In this situation, it is best to assign a team leader, someone who owns the responsibility to oversee the team's progress and report results to the "executive team." This eliminates the risk of power play and competitive jockeying to distract team members from their responsibilities.

A clear definition of the "what" is critical for performance results. It maps out both the expectations and desired outcomes. It provides the information necessary for team members to develop their roadmap, assign tasks, evaluate their progress and course correct when necessary.

When expectations are ambiguous, deliverables become subjective. This fosters an unhealthy environment in which finger pointing and blame supercede focused effort.

3. When. Deadlines become open to interpretation when not clearly defined. I've attended too many meetings where people said, "I'll get this to you next week." Everyone nodded their head and they ended the meeting. Well, what does next week really mean? Will the deliverable show up on Monday, Tuesday or possibly on Thursday?

This often happens when a task is critical. You'll hear people say, "This is urgent. Get this to me ASAP." Well, if you were to survey people about what ASAP means, you might hear comments like: "Within an hour." "Right now!" or "By the end of the day!" By any measure, this is poor communication.

Team members need to agree on what specifically needs to be done, why does it need to be done (helps them prioritize) and when exactly the deadline is.

It's best to define the deadline upfront. "John, you'll get that report to Jack by the end of the day on Tuesday, right?" John replies, "Absolutely."

4. Action Steps. When you've defined who is responsible for what and when it's due, the next step is to follow up on the committed Action Steps. It's best to conduct regular "status updates" so a large gap between meetings doesn't incur. How you handle this step is important. Don't be interrogative. Instead, be curious. Questions like, "How's the project coming?" "Have you encountered any roadblocks?" "Are you still planning on ___ being complete by ___ date?" "Is there anything I can do to assist you?" will encourage team members to be conversational with you, rather than protective or defensive.

If this process fails, my next move would be to talk with your immediate manager and explain the challenges that you have experienced. Don't be emotional or critical. Present your story with facts and figures. Ask for his/her counsel. It might be necessary for him/her to meet with this person's boss, and then, for the four of you to convene so you can work out and agree to the ground rules moving forward.

If your performance is contingent on this person getting you key information, and he is not delivering on a timely basis, you are justified in taking this situation to a higher level.



Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and consulting firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344.