Managing Conflicting Priorities

Keeping People Satisfied

Pam's client needs her to complete a project by the end of the week. The problem is, she has another, more urgent project that she needs to finish for another customer. There's no way that she can finish both projects on time.

So, how does she tell her client that his project isn't as urgent as the other one she’s committed to? And how can she do this without damaging their relationship?

Like Pam, many of us have situations where several people or teams are clamoring for our urgent attention. In this article, we'll look at a common-sense approach for managing conflicting priorities and for keeping everyone satisfied.

When Priorities Clash

You probably already know what happens when you have conflicting priorities.

First of all, the quality of your work can suffer as you work more quickly or multitask, or you may find yourself delivering work later than you promised.

Or, you might work very long hours to get everything done. Although this may prove effective in the short-term, it can lead to increased stress and lower performance.

This means that people who depend on you are disappointed, which affects your reputation and your working relationships. This can then lead to you missing further opportunities down the line, such as interesting new projects from your boss, or additional purchases from your clients.

How to Manage Conflicting Demands

So, how can you manage conflicting demands more effectively, and keep everyone happy?

1. Schedule Work Effectively

Your first step is to clarify your current priorities and to manage your schedule effectively.

This helps you know what you can do and when, so that you can negotiate deadlines credibly and manage people’s expectations when they come to you with new projects.

Where you can't squeeze a task into your schedule, an obvious thing to do is to delay activities that are not urgent, or are not particularly important.

Sometimes, however, it may not be clear what your highest priority tasks and projects are. If this is the case, there are several tools that can help you prioritize effectively – see our article on prioritization for more on these.

One of the most useful prioritization tools is Eisenhower’s Urgent/Important Principle. This helps you decide whether a task or project really does need to be done right now.
Once you've assessed your priorities, it can help to check these with the project-owners, such as your boss and your clients. Does your assessment of priorities match with theirs?

Then put your tasks and projects on your To-Do List or Action Program and add them to your schedule. You'll then know which tasks clash, which tasks you may need to negotiate new deadlines for, and where you'll need help to get things done on time.

Prioritize new tasks and projects and add these to your schedule, as and when they come in. Also, review your priorities on a regular basis.

Tip 1:
You can learn more about prioritization in our Bite-Sized Training session, How to Prioritize.

Tip 2:
Take our How Good is Your Time Management? quiz to find out if you can improve your personal productivity.

2. Negotiate Deadlines

Once you've clarified your priorities, look at your responsibilities and identify any deadlines that you need to re-negotiate.

Sometimes this might be as simple as saying "I'm working on a project for Jack that he needs by noon. Can I get this to you by five?" Other times, you may need to push a deadline back by a few weeks, or negotiate delivery of a project in smaller chunks.

To negotiate effectively, use Win-Win Negotiation to ensure that everyone comes away from the negotiation feeling that they've reached a fair compromise.

At this stage, you may find it useful to explain why you've ranked your priorities the way you have, and you may want to highlight the consequences of not rearranging deadlines. (This won't be appropriate in all cases: one customer won't appreciate you pushing her projects back so that you can complete a report for another client.)

3. Manage Expectations

It's also important that you manage people's expectations before you take on new tasks.

For example, if you're having a meeting with your boss about a possible new project, communicate your current priorities with her, and agree a completion date based on your current workload. Or, if you've just started working with a new client, let him know if there's likely to be a time lag before you can take on new tasks.

It's also important to manage expectations on any tasks or projects that you're working on.

For instance, if you've slipped behind schedule on a project for a manager in another department, let her know that you may have to deliver it later than planned. However, you clearly don't want to make this a habit – learn how to estimate time accurately so that you set realistic deadlines, and ensure that you've done everything that you sensibly can to get the project back on course (including working late) before you talk.
4. Be Professional

It can be stressful to juggle people’s priorities and expectations. This stress can leave you feeling frazzled, and it's tempting to relieve the tension by snapping at others, ignoring deadlines, or feeling sorry for yourself.

This is where it's important to be professional. Your professionalism, especially during times of intense pressure, is what best demonstrates your character to those around you.

Also, learn how to manage your emotions effectively, even when you're overloaded.

5. Be Flexible

Lastly, it’s important to be flexible: there may be times when you won’t be able to re-negotiate deadlines or delegate tasks to other people.

So be prepared to put in extra work, if appropriate, to keep people satisfied. Just make sure that this doesn't happen too often.

Defending Your Priorities

When you have to reprioritize tasks and projects, there will be times when other people disagree with your choices. If this happens, try to negotiate a new deadline that works for both of you. If they keep insisting that their project or task is more important than the one you need to work on, then you need to learn how to defend your priorities, ideally without damaging your relationship.

For example, imagine that you've just told your colleague that you can't finish a report until tomorrow, because your boss has asked you to complete a task that will take the rest of the day. However, she's not letting this go, because the report she needs will take just 30 minutes of your time. In her eyes, you're being unreasonable.

Start by showing empathy. Communicate to her that you understand why she feels frustrated or upset.

Then, explain your needs clearly but assertively. For instance, reiterate that you must complete your boss's project by 5:30. You need to keep the promise you made to your boss, so it's essential that you devote your attention to this task.

Once you explain your needs, work on reaching a compromise such as offering to work on your colleague's report first thing tomorrow, or offering to help her with another task later in the week.

Tip:

Our article "Yes" to the Person, "No" to the Task offers additional strategies that you can use to assert yourself, while maintaining a good relationship with your colleagues.

Key Points
Many of us have conflicting demands, where several people or teams are clamoring for our attention. It’s important to know how to manage these demands effectively, so that everyone is happy.

Start by clarifying your priorities and scheduling work effectively. Then use appropriate negotiation strategies to rearrange deadlines.

Also learn to manage people’s expectations effectively, be professional even when you’re under pressure, and be flexible – there may be times when you will have to put in some extra work to keep people satisfied.

When you need to defend your priorities, show empathy, but be assertive in your approach.