You missed a deadline...

now what?

5 STEPS TO HELP YOU GET THE PROJECT BACK ON TRACK

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When you realize a deadline has been missed, it's natural for stress and panic set in. Not only do you have the pressure of getting your project back on track, but you're also faced with breaking the bad news to your boss, sponsor, customer, and other stakeholders.

We've all been there. In fact, missing deadlines is so common that asking how people have handled a missed deadline has become a standard question in job interviews.

By following these five steps, you can get your project back on track and take precautions to ensure the same problem doesn't crop back up in the future. All while reassuring your stakeholders that you have a solid handle on the project and its success.

48% of projects don't finish on time

"Pulse of the Profession 2018: Success in Disruptive Times." Project Management Institute, Inc. , 2018, www.pmi.org/-/media/pmi/documents/public/pdf/learning/thought-leadership/pulse/pulse-of-the-profession-2018.pdf.

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#1 Understand the **implications**

The first thing to do when you discover a deadline has been missed is understand what it really means for your project.

After all, if you had slack in your schedule, and the team can catch up without any major deliverables being missed, then very little response is needed. Simply continue to monitor your project and take steps to prevent further missed deadlines.

Questions to help you identify **how this will affect the project**

→ **Was this task on the critical path, so that a delay puts the project deadline at risk?**

→ **How many other tasks and resources will this delay impact?**

→ **Is this going to result in a missed deliverable?**

→ **Have any new conflicts, constraints, or risks arisen due to this delay?**

If you confirm that you do not have slack in the schedule, and the missed deadline is going to negatively impact your project, complete the next four steps.

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#2   Identify your **options**

Once you're aware of the full extent of what the missed deadline means, it's time to start identifying your options for mitigating these impacts.

The first option you should consider is whether the schedule can be compressed to make up for lost time. Two schedule compression tactics that may be useful are:

1. **Fast-tracking**
Move up the start dates on activities to begin before the previous task was completely finished. For instance, you may have it scheduled that editing of an ebook will begin after the first draft is finished. Fast-tracking would mean starting editing earlier, after only a few chapters are finished.

2. **Crashing**
Add extra people to the project or certain tasks within it to speed up completion. Bringing in extra writers and having them each simultaneously tackle separate sections of the e-book to complete it faster is an example of crashing.

If you cannot compress the schedule, then it's time to consider other alternatives, such as:

- Reduce the scope of the project, such as removing a deliverable or product feature.

- Lower the quality requirements to shorten time frames. (I.e., reducing the number of reviews or shortening the review timelines.)

- Maintain the project as is and accept the later deadline.

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#3   Create a **resolution plan**

> Now that you've identified your options, it's time to determine what the best solution is to get your project back on track. To create your resolution plan, ask yourself and your team the following questions:

Which of our potential options is the best solution, considering how well it will help us recover the schedule as well as the cost and risks involved?

What steps or tasks need to be added to our project schedule to complete the recommended course of action?

Will there be any remaining impacts after we complete this resolution plan? For example, if we can only partially recover the schedule, how far behind will we still be, and are there any further steps we can take? Also, are there any new risks we need to monitor due to our new action plan?

Do we need any formal approval from our customer, sponsor, or other stakeholders before we implement this plan? This could include approval for more money, extra resources, or to delay a deliverable in the schedule.

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#4   Communicate to **stakeholders**

It's important to tell your stakeholders as soon as possible that a deadline has been missed. If you wait too long, they could feel that you're hiding information which will destroy your credibility.

However, you never want to present bad news to a customer or executive without being able to tell them what you're going to do about it. This is why it's vital that you work through steps 1–3 before communicating the problem.

If it's going to take more than a day or two to identify your options and create your resolution plan, give stakeholders a heads up that there has been a project delay, as well as a deadline for when you'll be able to provide more information about the problem and present a proposed solution.

When communicating a missed deadline, keep the following tips in mind:

1. Make sure that every stakeholder who is impacted by the missed deadline is aware of the delay and the resolution plan. This may include the customer, sponsor, your team members, vendors and suppliers, and other people within your organization.

2. Take responsibility for your actions and those of your team. Don't make excuses or try to lay blame.

3. Focus on the impact and the solution. It's too late to avoid the deadline being missed, so the emphasis should be on how to move forward.

4. If it's a critical deliverable or milestone that was missed, you should have the conversation face-to-face. This can either be in-person or by video chat if your stakeholders are remote.

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#5

Learn from your mistakes

When a deadline is missed, your priority needs to be planning and implementing how to get back on track. Only once your plan is communicated, approved, and underway, should you switch gears and start delving into what went wrong.

Nevertheless, analyzing why the problem occurred is still essential, as it will help you from preventing the same issue from occurring in the future.

Any time you or someone on your team makes a mistake, it should be considered a learning opportunity and be captured in your lessons learned for the project.

To ensure the lesson is learned, do the following:

1. Consider which of the three causes of missed deadlines occurred (optimistic timelines, unclear expectations, or poor time management.)

2. Implement the appropriate steps to prevent the same issue from occurring again.

3. Share with your stakeholders and with other project teams what happened as well as what preventative actions you took, so others can avoid making the same mistake.

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