

# How To Lay Down The Law If Your Team Keeps Blowing Deadlines

**How you treat project deadlines can speak volumes about your organization's commitment to the work. These tough-love tips will get you moving like a well-oiled machine.**



A huge factor in why so many organizations have so much trouble doing what they intend to do--on time--is because when they fail to meet a deadline, nothing happens. Companies say they want to be more strategic and they want to execute better, but this simple failure to address missed deadlines keeps organizations from making any real, strategic progress.

Here's what it looks like:

A project is committed. The dates come and go--and then no one even talks about it. The result is that people who were on the hook either assume that they have been granted more time, or it wasn't that important to begin with.

Then no new deadline is established--because no one is talking about it at all. So the strategic task takes an even lower priority over the more urgent tactical demands of the moment. You can't let the date come and go, leave the failure totally unacknowledged and unexamined, and expect to make progress. This sends all the wrong messages and sets a very low standard of execution.

What you are communicating (by not communicating) is:

- It wasn't that important after all
- It doesn't matter that it didn't get done
- There are no consequences for missing a deadline
- We're not serious about meeting our commitments
- "Late" is okay in our organizational values

I have observed four key reasons executives fail to follow up on missed deadlines. They are either:

1. Too busy to keep track
2. Not personally good at keeping track
3. Don't like the conflict of keeping track
4. Don't know what consequences to impose when something is off track

The first two are really easy to fix. If you are not getting this done well yourself (or hate doing it), get someone who's naturally good at this to help you. This will be a breakthrough for you, your team, and your business. Have a chief of staff or process/program manager who helps you with the hard work and detail of tracking commitments. I can say that having such a person helping me in all of my executive roles was a huge factor in my ability to lead an organization that consistently delivered. Numbers 3 and 4, though, you can't delegate. As a general manager, if these things make you uncomfortable you need to do them anyway.

Here is a technique to deal with the necessary conflict of missed deadlines without it being emotional or personal, so it's much easier.

1. Be really clear up front about dates, owners, and measures, and create a dashboard to communicate the status of each key project at the beginning of the project when everything is still “green.” (No conflict yet.)
2. Use this dashboard to kick off the project. Also use it as your communication document to share status information on a regular schedule with all stakeholders before anything goes wrong. (Still, no conflict.)
3. The magic happens because everyone can see their name and accountability on the dashboard. And they know this dashboard is the communication document that will go to everyone who matters. Shame them into keeping on track with peer visibility. (Result: More work is finished on time--so less need for conflict.)
4. Then when something is going wrong, going from green to yellow or red, it is not a personal conflict to bring it up with the person or the community. You can give them a chance to keep their line green on the dashboard. Then, if it still goes wrong, at least it is not a surprise. Everyone saw it coming. The person who failed to deliver had the chance to avoid it, and knew beforehand that it would be communicated and addressed.

### **What consequences to impose**

Managers get confused and think, “Okay, the person missed a key deadline, how do I address it? Do I need to fire the person? That seems like overkill. And I don’t really want to fire the person.” Then, the tendency is to not fire the person, but instead, to do nothing at all. But there are myriad options between termination and nothing. You don’t need to fire someone every time a deadline is missed. So if you don’t fire the person for missing a deadline, what do you do to enforce consequences?

You don’t need to be a tyrant. But you do need to have a conversation. Three simple questions will do. Ask, “What happened? How do you intend to recover? How do you intend to prevent this next time?” The act of having this conversation sends the message that it is not okay to miss a deadline. The conversation itself is a consequence. Especially compared to doing nothing.

### **Maintaining motivation**

Many leaders struggle with the motivation factor. They feel like if they have the conversation, they will be giving someone a hard time and the person may get demotivated, be less committed, or leave. In reality, when you address a missed deadline, the person actually feels a little good because this difficult conversation is reinforcing that their work really matters. Also, I find that strong performers take a lot of ownership in these conversations and put even more pain on themselves than they feel like they are getting from you. Avoiding the conversation is equivalent to letting the person know that what they were working on wasn’t very important--which I think is always even more demotivating.

### **It should be uncomfortable**

Sure it’s an uncomfortable conversation, but it should be! You missed a deadline. That should not be pleasant, comfortable news for anyone. It’s not about coming down hard on someone or being disrespectful or nasty. It’s about moving the business forward. Missed deadlines left unaddressed stall the business, and degrade the trust, motivation, and commitment of the team.

--*Patty Azzarello* is an executive, best-selling author, speaker and business advisor to CEOs. You can find Patty at [AzzarelloGroup.com](http://AzzarelloGroup.com), follow her on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#), or read her book [RISE...3 Practical Steps for Advancing Your Career, Standing Out as a Leader, AND Liking Your Life](#).