

Maintaining Grace Under Pressure: How to Handle Too Much

Direction

By Deborah Hoard

I recently received a frenzied call from a business associate needing advice on managing an all-too-common situation in the workplace. He was working on a project for a Fortune 500 company and was being given conflicting directions by three different executives.

“What am I supposed to do? Follow the plan my team originally developed and ignore the recommendations of these senior executives?” he asked. “Or, do I try to please them all and send my team into disarray causing several inevitable fire drills?”

We’ve all been there . . . reporting to one executive on a specific project, and dealing with the challenge of working with several other executives who have differing visions of what the assignment entails and how it should be done.

In a perfect corporate scenario, contractors, consultants, and employees all receive their work direction from a single consistent and unchanging source. In today’s fast-paced business world, where reactive actions are more common than proactive planning, the work process rarely happen this way. So, how do you gracefully handle the pressure of too much direction and still deliver a successful project?

Where Are They Coming From?

If the executive is asking questions about the process of the project, resist the urge to get defensive. She is likely trying to figure out if her idea could better the process before making her recommendation.

It is important to recognize the underlying reasons for the additional executive input. There are three distinct reasons why executives are moved to be more involved.

- 1) *The competitive landscape has changed.* There are several scenarios that might happen. For example, your company has learned that a competitor’s product will be late to market. Maybe a competitor has just issued a news announcement stating a new enhancement for the product, or even their entry into a new technology. When any of these happen, the executives may have their own ideas as to what needs to be done in the short-term to keep the company’s competitive edge.
- 2) *Key players were absent during the beginning planning stage.* Perhaps a key position was filled late in the process, an executive was not previously considered a key player and now is, or an executive who was busy with another project is now available.
- 3) *An executive power play is in the works.* You’ve seen this happen. The executive perceives the project as being a high corporate priority with an opportunity for glory

and is trying to get her name attached to the project. Or the executive is trying to build his empire and wants to leverage the success of this project to gain new headcount or additional budget.

Once you identify a particular executive's motivation, you can better assess how to respond and what to do with their direction and ideas.

Do You Heed the Direction or Not?

Handling the executive's input requires tact. You can't ignore it, but at the same time you can't give the impression that it will be implemented. The best way to determine the validity of the input is to ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What is the impact on the final completed project?
 - a. Will it increase the profit margin?
 - b. Will it sell more products?
 - c. Will it reach more customers?
- 2) Is the additional direction in sync with the overall corporate and department goals?
- 3) How does their recommendation affect your project resources?
 - a. Will it require more budget or less?
 - b. Will it require additional people on the team, or will it free up a team member for other duties?
 - c. Will it impact the project deadline?

After answering these questions, you will have a firm grasp of whether or not you need to escalate the new recommendations and look for approval from team members and your reporting executive.

How To Gracefully Respond

Although you are personally invested and involved in the project yourself, be sure to determine the executive's motivation and listen sincerely to what they have to say.

Acknowledge his input, set the expectation that the recommendations might not be used, and inform him of the next steps that you will take.

Acknowledge:

- "I see your point."*
- "That makes sense."*
- "That's a good idea."*

Set expectations that the recommendation may not be used:

- "I can't guarantee that we'll use it, because the process is already underway."*
- "We have a contract to use this vendor, so I'm not sure if we can change that in the short term."*

“Other executives already signed off on this project, so we’ll need to include them in this decision.”

Share your consideration efforts and next steps:

“Let me think about it and talk to some team members to see what is do-able.”

“Let me talk to my manager and see if she goes for it.”

Then be certain to inform your direct manager about the conversation as soon as possible. The last thing you want is for her to be surprised to learn about it from someone else. Be sure to provide the reasons for and against heeding the additional direction so that she has the information needed to work with you to reach a decision.

The Results

My colleague considered my advice and determined that it was not necessary for him to heed two of the executives’ recommendations. However, he did push his team to incorporate the third executive’s ideas. And he successfully delivered his project to the delight of all of the executives.

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Deborah Hoard, Founder and President of Net Results, has over 16 years experience of successfully turning around critical marketing communications projects that are in danger of not making their deadlines for such top companies as Apple Computer Inc., Cisco Systems Inc., Informatica, Inc., Maxtor Corporation, and Oracle Corporation. To find out more, visit her Web site at www.get-net-results.com.