# Setting deadlines for employees: 4 do's and don'ts

*Without deadlines, employees flounder. They can't be aware of the urgency or priorities of a project unless their supervisors tell them. Following are four tips to help supervisors set realistic deadlines for their employees:*

**1. Do be specific** Name the target day and time. And mean what you say. If you ask for completion "next week," don't complain on Friday that you really needed it on Wednesday.

If you say, "By the end of the month," be sure that 5 p.m. on the afternoon of the 31st is acceptable.

By contrast, if you wanted the project completed by 9 a.m. on the 31st so you could present it to your boss that afternoon, say so. Otherwise, you won't meet your boss's deadline.

**2. Do clarify priorities** Let people know if this assignment takes precedence over any other projects they're working on now. Avoid that old, favorite deadline, "ASAP," which usually translates in an employee's mind as "whenever it gets done."

What does ASAP mean? Drop everything and work overtime, or first finish up what you're already doing?

*Even worse:* Never tell employees to work on something "when you get a chance." If you do, don't be surprised if it never happens.

**3. Don't set false deadlines** Setting a deadline earlier than necessary (because you don't trust your employees to meet the real deadline) creates more problems than it solves.

Your staff will soon learn that's how you operate and will assume there's always air in the schedule. As a result, they'll always miss that first deadline, just as you knew they would.

Nor should you claim that a project is a rush job that just came up when, in fact, you've sat on it for a few days. People have a way of finding out the truth. Also, being dishonest about deadlines can hurt you later when a project truly is a rush job. Your staff may not believe you and won't make the extra effort to get it done on time.

*One caveat:* If you have a new employee, you may want to allow extra time in the schedule for revisions. Let the employee know that you're building review time into the schedule.

**4. Do establish an update schedule** The best-laid plans can go astray, and so can deadlines. You'll minimize the chance of this occurring by setting up a progress report schedule when you assign the project. This is especially important for long-term projects.

When you make the assignment, discuss how you and the employee will communicate about her progress. Do you want the person to stop by your office once a week and give you a quick status report? Send you a daily e-mail? Update the status at the monthly staff meeting?

The schedule should be reasonable and convenient for both of you. It should make sense in terms of the length

and complexity of the job, as well as the employee's competence and experience. Whatever you decide, now's the time to set the schedule.