How to handle multiple and unclear job directives….

Professional Development Series by Laura Lee Rose

www.LauraLeeRose.com

Hello, this is Laura Lee Rose – Corporate Exit Strategist for the blooming entrepreneur – and I am a business and life coach that specializes in Time Management, Project management training and work-life balance strategies. Today we are sharing tips on how to handle multiple (and often conflicting) directives from various clients, managers and stakeholders.

Whether we are in the corporate environment or starting our own small business, we have competing resources for our attention, skills and talents. How can we not only professionally handle these multiple and unclear job directives, but use these opportunities to propel us forward faster?

Step 1) Acknowledge and congratulate ourselves for being in demand. Because we are valuable in our field of choice, people do come to us for our advice and coaching. We don't want to stop this trend. We don't want to resent the people that value and need us. We just want to better advantage of this great phenomenon. You need to create a daily schedule that allows you to get important work done **and** handle the expected interruptions. Although you don't' know exactly what will interrupt you, you know that you will be interrupted. Therefore, the intelligent thing to do is to schedule and integrate interruption time into your daily schedule.

Step 2) Incorporate a **Sprint and Buffer** technique for splitting up your tasks to mini-tasks (self-contained, short duties that can be handled in a few hours). Once your larger tasks have been split into mini-tasks, you can now schedule buffer time between the mini-tasks to allow interruptions during the day. If an emergency doesn't occur between mini-task1 and mini-task2, you continue to mini-task2. When an interruption does occur, you share when you will be done with your current mini-task (because you deliberately designed it to take only be a couple of hours) and offer to work with them when your current mini-task is completed. This allows you to stay focused on what you are currently doing, while giving your client, co-worker or manger a reasonable time-frame for their request.

Step 3) Don't assume they are asking you do *'do the work'*. Realize that the person coming you to help doesn't necessarily need YOU to solve or work their problem. Ask them explicitly what they are expecting from you. They may just need getting to the next step. Providing them coaching, or recommendations provide them the help that they desire. Sending them in the right direction allows them to take their next step. And most of the time, that is all they really need. Don't assume additional work on yourself.

Step 4) TimeBox your interruptions. If you value your time, others will do the same. When someone interrupts your work schedule, take ownership of your calendar. Set ground rules on how long you can devote to their interruption. Even go as far as to set a timer to distract you back to your project. If their project problem takes longer than the time you have scheduled for them, then suggest either a separate longer meeting at your next available calendar date OR suggest someone else that may be just as effective as you.

Step 5) Be transparent. Share your entire list of projects that you are currently working on. Allow your clients, co-workers, managers better prioritize your time. Ask them if they feel their current last-moment request is of higher priority than the things that you are currently working on. Ask them which projects they are willing to postpone or delete, in exchange for this new request. Ask them to attend meetings with the other stakeholders to explain the change in priorities. If there seems to be a conflict between executives or directors, get the associated stakeholders in the same room to discuss the change in priorities. Do not try to resolve the conflict on your own (for you will not satisfy anyone).

Step 6) If you have unclear directives, substitute any ambiguous and vague requirements with your explicit understanding of the project features; provide a sketch, prototype or high-level demo to the client and stakeholders; use your requirement specifications to gain clarity. It's okay if your requirements are incorrect. The goal of this technique is **not** to create correct requirements the first time out of the gate. The intent of this technique is to gain clarity and start the discussion in the right direction. Take responsibility for getting all the information you require to produce a quality product or service. This is **your** reputation that you are building.

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