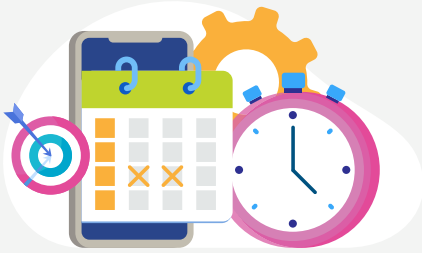


# THE DEADLINE DILEMMA

## HOW TO GAIN BUY-IN FOR A CHANGE TO ENGAGEMENT TIMELINES



There are many situations where, internally, a deadline has been set for an engagement process to be completed and it's tight! The implications of a tight timeframe are significant for you, the organisation and the people you are engaging with. Here are some useful tips to help you have an effective, internal conversation and address this common challenge.



### 1 UNDERSTAND THE DRIVERS AND MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE TIMEFRAME

Take some time to understand the motivations for the deadline. What requirements do the decision-makers have around this date? What concerns or broader organisational needs does this project feed into? By understanding these needs you may be able to find an alternate solution that meets them without compromising the whole engagement process. This might involve commencing the project in a small way, undertaking a smaller piece of research or starting with some collection of current data. Information can flow from this work that could help inform another organisational need.



### 2 OUTLINE THE RISKS

Be clear to decision-makers about what the implications are of a short timeframe. This means you can start to agree on how to solve it. We often refer to risks in terms of three domains (as part of a risk assessment process developed by the International Association of Public Participation Australasia): risks to the organisation, risks to the process and risks to the community. Take some time to define the risks in the context of your project.

Some classic risks for short timeframes are:

- **Decreased levels of interest and participation** – people don't know it's happening because the activation phase was too short, and they didn't have time to mobilise and get involved.
- **Perception of fairness** – if you aren't giving much time for people to properly engage then be prepared for backlash. If you know that your community is already outraged/polarised about an issue, prepare your organisation for more of the same. Develop messages you will use to respond to questions about the fairness or genuineness of the process.
- **Reputation** – if your purpose is to build your reputation and you are short-changing the time allocated to do this, then you need to aim for reduced outcomes and possible repercussions. Build honest, clear messages about your process and prepare to respond to comments and questions.



### FALL BACK TO THE ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Start by defining what it is you want to achieve from this engagement. This means not just the output but the outcomes. Many of these outcomes will be about the experience people have and the relationship that you want to create. A rushed engagement program can look disingenuous and, in fact, send you backwards. Before going ahead and 'soldiering on' with an arbitrary deadline, instead stop and regroup around the objectives. Gain agreement and commitment that these objectives are valuable and important to the organisation in the long run. This will give decision-makers clarity and help them to understand that timeframes serve the objectives rather than the other way around.



### MAP OUT TIMEFRAME SHIFTS ON A ROADMAP

Pull out that GANTT chart and reshape it with the desired timeframes. Fully understand whether a change in timing has a huge implication or a minor one. Sometimes these enforced deadlines have been set months (or even years) ago and the context has significantly changed since then. Priorities will often adapt or change over time and the environment around issues is always moving, so project milestones should too. By reviewing these timeframes in detail, you can provide evidence to decision-makers that will help them feel comfortable that a shift can be achieved without huge implications for the organisation or other work.



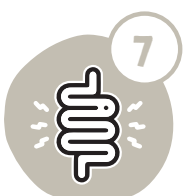
### STAGE THE PROJECT

Consider completing one stage, meeting or big milestone for now. Potentially, this one step forward may meet the organisational need for progress. This step might be as simple as starting the planning phase and getting your strategic engagement plan completed. By creating some movement, the project has officially begun and for the purposes of meeting internal KPIs this may suffice.



### SIMPLIFY THE REMIT

You may need to scale back on your engagement objectives, reduce the level of complexity and simplify your engagement approach to meet the timeframes. As hard as this is, it is better to undertake transparent and genuine engagement with a promise you can truly keep, than to promise more than can be delivered in the time you have. Managing these sorts of expectations early will ensure you don't put your community off-side in the process and help you meet the needs of decision-makers.



### TRUST YOUR GUT

If you are feeling like it's too tight - then it is! Often decision-makers think so too - especially when you present risks and alternatives to them. Many people squash this internal feeling during the early stages of project development and regret it later. You know there is a mismatch, so act on it. Find a way to at least tweak the timeframes, give the process a little breathing space and make it work better for you and your community. It may not require a major overhaul.



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