

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## Dealing with Stumbling Blocks: Three Surefire Tips for Getting Things Done

By Linda L. Hardenstein

"This is the fourth time I've contacted Amanda, and there's still no response. She's such a procrastinator! I need her answer *now* or I'll miss the managing partner's deadline. She's holding up the whole works, and it's going to make *me* look bad!"



Does this scenario sound familiar? If you work in a firm or a government agency, you've probably experienced decision delays associated with a hierarchical or bureaucratic organizational structure. There are plenty of reasons for delays, especially when decisions have to work their way through a maze of individuals and committees, or up the chain of command.

For legal management professionals who want to get things done, delayed decisions can be frustrating and stress-inducing. If someone you perceive as a procrastinator is holding up the process, it can be even more exasperating. Your precious time can be wasted when they ignore your follow-up emails, fail to return your dogged phone calls, escape your attempts to nab them in the hallway, or expertly dodge you in the elevator. And all you want from them is an answer.

So how do you light a fire under someone who seems to drag their heels when faced with making decisions?

### MANAGE YOUR PERCEPTIONS

Getting the best out of a busy decision maker starts with keeping your own emotions in check. Perceiving someone as a procrastinator or out to make your life difficult diminishes your power.

Self-management is a top leadership and emotional intelligence skill every legal management professional needs to employ to be effective. It's the ability to keep your emotions under control so you can adapt, respond appropriately to a situation and expertly problem-solve. Why waste your energy getting upset at someone's behavior when what you really want is to help him or her get you what you need?

When you notice that you're getting upset from perceiving people as blocking you or slowing your agenda, take a deep breath. Is what you're

accusing them of 100 percent true? Realize you have a choice. Do you want to play the blame game or accomplish a breakthrough? How do you break through?

## BE STRATEGIC

If you're a "do it now" kind of person, understanding why someone procrastinates can be a challenge. The more you understand the many reasons people procrastinate, the better you'll be at alleviating decision logjams before they happen. Procrastination occurs when:

- There are time constraints, and someone is having a hard time managing his or her time.
- Higher priorities take precedence.
- Perfectionist tendencies cause someone to overdo, which takes more time.
- Someone fears making the wrong decision.

How can you clear away some of the items above before they become roadblocks? If you know decision makers who have a hard time managing their time, you have to manage it for them. Give them a deadline before the decision is actually needed. Ask when and how to best follow up with them — agree on a time, and find out the best way to do it.

As the director of a legal department, I learned quickly that just asking "What do you think?" got me nowhere. When I got strategic and presented a factual analysis along with options, partners got me answers a lot more quickly.

## COMMUNICATE FOR RESULTS

People are more likely to make a decision when it is in their interest to do so. How can the decision advance their agenda? Are there negative consequences that will occur as a result of a delay? Will it cost them money, make them look bad or embarrass the firm?

When I prefaced my request to a partner with "The price of the new equipment will go up by \$1,800 if the decision is delayed," it became a priority. Communicate the consequences of a delay up front, and you're sure to get a decision maker's attention.

Creating a breakthrough mindset, getting strategic and communicating in a way that captures the decision maker's interest removes stumbling blocks and accelerates your agenda to get things done.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Linda Hardenstein, MPA, is a Professional Certified Coach and Chief Executive Officer of Hardenstein Consulting, a leadership, management training and coaching company. She's also a Course Instructor for ALA's eLearning Center. With more than 25 years in the legal field, Hardenstein has consulted with hundreds of attorneys and managers to improve their performance and careers.

[Email](#)

[LinkedIn](#)

[Website](#)



**LINDA L.  
HARDENSTEIN**  
*Chief Executive Officer  
Hardenstein Consulting*

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## CUTTING THROUGH THE RED TAPE

For more tips, attend Linda's [session](#), "Working through the Bureaucratic Red Tape of Decision-Making," on May 25 at the Annual Conference & Expo in LA.

