Deadline Culture – does it help?

by **Vector Consulting Group**

"When are you going to finish this task?"...

Every person in the corporate world will relate to the above question as a boss or as a subordinate. The bosses love questioning while the subordinates don't quite enjoy answering. The deadline culture is all prevalent in corporate world. It is in fact a primary tool of control of managers over subordinates. Every meeting starts or ends with such flood of commitments. Perceptions on individual performance are built around adherence to the commitments. People who adhere to commitments are seen in positive light while others are not.

Deadlines have a perceived advantage – it controls the wastage of time. The best proof of this advantage is status of any task which does not have a deadline. Experience tells us such tasks, in many cases, do not get completed at all.

But the problem starts when many commitments are thrust upon few resources. When faced with existing load of work and new commitments every day, resources try and ask for comfortable time while making new commitments. This helps them delay the start of the task to accommodate other urgent tasks than can crop up in the time period. Interestingly, deadline gives important information to resources – by how much time, they can afford to delay the start of the task. Start of the job close to the deadlines leaves less time to manage uncertainties, detected while doing the task. In many instances, due to last moment pressure of deadline, resources skip final checks and hand over an incomplete work which in turn expands work in the downstream departments.

The deadlines for a new task, in many situations, are also set without much consideration to existing commitments. This creates conflict of priorities between tasks. Many tasks are equally important. Given this situation, the resources prioritize based on what they think is best or based on decibel levels of the scream of his boss. In either case, the prioritization decisions may not be in the best interest of the company. In some situations, we find resources not attending to constraint of the company and moving to some other job because of deadline pressures.

A company well entrenched in the deadline culture does not have a fixed priority list of tasks for any of its managers even for a day. The day starts with one plan of tasks and ends in another set of tasks, with frequent interruptions in between doing a task. Meetings clash, resources move out of one meeting, in between, to attend others while the working hours expands beyond 8 hours.

The assumption that deadlines control wastage of time seems erroneous.

Deadline culture is all about abdication of responsibility by managers. It helps them avoid the trouble of getting into details of issues related to doing the job effectively.
So what is the alternative to this unproductive culture which helps no one?

Instead of asking just one question on when the job will complete – managers should ask 3 questions for effective execution:

1 When will you start the job? This question will help managers understand the priority list decided by the resources. Many of the tasks up in the priority list may not be of top priority to the organization. A discussion on start date will help resources align priorities, move start of some tasks lower in order. In many cases the decision to reprioritize is with the managers themselves.

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2 What are the obstacles to work uninterrupted on this task, once it starts? This question tries to surface all sources of interruptions and managers can take decisions, or act as a filter to prevent all interruptions from elongating the task duration.

3 What is the remaining duration? This third question should only be asked after the start of the job. The question should be asked frequently. The idea is not to set a deadline again but to understand if there are interruptions to the task. The trend of remaining duration information will provide information on interruptions to the job. The role of managers is again to facilitate effective working.

Yes, replacing one easy question with 3 detailed questions requires a change in mindset of managers – a shift from controlling to facilitating. It is also a shift from abdication of responsibility to taking charge for resolving issues affecting the task.

So what do we do now with deadlines?
Eliminate all deadlines except the one at the end of the project.