

Before you start a project, identify and prioritize your deadline, scope, and resources

Why do it?



"You'd be surprised the headaches you can avoid by addressing these four simple questions before beginning a project."

No matter how much higher-ups want you to get more done faster and with fewer resources, it's just not possible. If you launch a new project with unrealistic expectations, you're setting your team up for stress, failure — or both. Instead, pause first to identify the project's deadline, scope, and resource variables and to determine which are most important. Changing one variable impacts the others, so you'll need to make tradeoffs (e.g., shortening a deadline means you'll need to reduce your scope and/or increase your resources to get it done in time). Here's how to determine where you need to make adjustments in order for your team to succeed.

How to do it:

1. Identify the project's deadline, scope, and resource variables.

Let's say your boss comes to you with this ask: "We need 1,000 marketing brochures for an industry conference."

Map out:

- **Deadline:** When is the conference and when must the brochures be ready?
- **Scope:** How many elements are there to this project (e.g., initial design, approval, finalizing, printing)? How complex are they? Do we already have some or all of the content or does it need to be created from scratch? How polished does the work need to be?
- **Resources:** How many people can we devote to the project? How much time do they have to work on it? What's our budget?

You may need to talk to multiple people (your boss, team members, and other stakeholders) to get a clear understanding of each variable — exactly what needs to be done by when and what resources are available.

2. Determine which one or two of the variables are most important.

Is it more important that the project be completed by a certain date? Is it possible to adjust the scope or to secure more resources? Must it come in within budget?

Here's a sample objective for this project:

- Create 1,000 high-quality brochures for a conference next Thursday using half of Cameron's time and a print budget of \$400.

Meeting the deadline is crucial, since the conference date is fixed. It's also very important that the brochures be well-researched and polished. So, you will likely need some flexibility in terms of staff time and budget.

3. If necessary, negotiate the third variable.

Check with your team members to see if it is realistic for them to get everything done well and on time with the resources allotted. If so, you're on your way. If not, talk with your boss about adjusting the third variable. If you learn that the third variable can't change, then try reprioritizing the other two variables. Your boss may say, "Everything's important!" But remember, you need the flexibility to adjust at least one variable so that your project doesn't become impossible.

Using the above project, you might say to your boss:

- *“If we want to have 1,000 detailed brochures that meet our brand standards in time for next Thursday, we’ll need to free up more of Cameron’s time or increase our budget to hire help. Or perhaps we could design a simpler, more generic brochure that will take less of Cameron’s time?”*

4. Once you agree on a plan, communicate the details.

Explain your deadline, scope, and resources — and their priority — to your team and other stakeholders so everyone’s on the same page. Then, it’s time to start working!

More on project management:

- [How to get input from your direct reports when setting project deadlines](#)
- [Hold a premortem for a planned project to anticipate challenges](#)
- [10 ways to be more strategic in your everyday work](#)