

The Missed Deadline: Whose Problem is it?

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Introduction

David had always thought of himself as an effective problem-solver but now he realized he was faced with a situation that needed resolving on a number of levels. “What am I going to do now?” David thought out loud. In the short term, he imagined a way to tell Andrew in the London office of the Manila Design Services (MDS) that would appease their new client. In the longer term, David wondered about how he could avoid the situation about missed deadlines from happening again. David just received a Skype meeting request from Andrew, the Director in the London office. He knew that Andrew was going ask where the drawings were. The meeting with the client was due to begin and Andrew desperately needed the missing drawings. “I don’t really know how to explain to him about the missed deadline,” he said to himself.

It was 8:00 p.m. local time in Manila and 1:00 p.m. in London. David sat at his desk at the end of this busy day and thought about what just happened. The engineering drawings that he expected were not completed by the agreed upon deadline. A similar incident happened only two weeks ago with another Computer Aided Design (CAD) Specialist with the company who also missed a deadline. He thought to himself that this was yet another example of ‘Filipino Time’ which was a term his expat colleagues often jokingly talked about referring to the locals’ habit of arriving at appointments late and for missing deadlines.

“I just can’t believe Tony went home without telling anyone that he hadn’t finished these engineering drawings,” David muttered to himself. “Why don’t people realize how important deadlines are? Don’t they realize the impact of these actions on our company reputation?” he mused.

David met CAD Specialist Tony, who missed the deadline to submit the drawings, in the conference room the following day. He asked him why he didn’t come to him as soon as he realized that he wasn’t going to meet the 5:00 p.m. deadline. David explained that he could have notified Andrew, the Director in the London office of the MDS, to advise him they needed an extension. That would have been acceptable but in the absence of this information, everyone was working to the 5:00 p.m. deadline. A missed deadline in Manila had a ripple effect on subsequent actions in the company’s process chain.

Tony, the Filipino CAD Specialist, explained to David that he did not want to tell him that he was not going to finish on time because he didn't want to annoy him. "But that's ridiculous because by you telling me there is going to be a delay is the only way I know how you are doing without me having to continuously check up on you," David responded. Tony remained silent. He gave David a sheepish look and got up to get ready to leave the conference room. David sighed and thought there was no point in continuing the conversation further so he let Tony go back to his desk.

Two years ago, when David arrived in his new assignment as a design manager in the Philippines for the first time, he did not have preset expectations. He had a fairly easy going management style but in his mind he expected that when someone committed to a deadline, that he or she met the deadline unless there was a very good reason.

A Multinational and Multicultural Business

Manila Design Services (MDS) was an engineering design consultancy that specialized in building infrastructure services. Its head office was in the United Kingdom (UK) and there were regional offices in the Middle East, Europe and Asia. Workers in those three regions were from different nationalities and cultures. Thus, in addition to the work process, the managers also had to deal with different cultural issues. The office in the Philippines was located in Manila and was the 'hub' for engineering design work. This location allowed the UK company to market itself as having a 15-hour work day. It took pride in the fact that engineers in Manila worked on a project for 7 hours and, because of the time difference, the engineers in the UK could continue working on that same project for an additional 8 hours. This extended working day meant that a project took less time to complete overall. These extended working hours between the two locations in two different time zones gave the company a great selling point since most of their clients were 'blue chip' companies located around the world.

There were 60 staff members in the Manila office, all of whom were Filipino nationals. There were five administrative staff, 30 engineers, six of which are female, and 25 CAD specialists. The office was managed by a team of two British Design Managers, who were experienced, senior engineers. The Manila office operated a flexi-time system. This meant that people have to be at their desk during the core hours between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. local time but they could come in and leave work at variable times. The working week comprised 40 hours with 1 hour for lunch and two 15-minute breaks. Overtime work was voluntary and was paid.

Work Flow

Work requests were received in the Manila office on a daily basis accompanied by a work order describing what production was required along with an estimated time to undertake the task and when delivery was required back to the person who requested the work. These work orders came from Europe and the Middle East. Usually the Design Manager in Manila approved each work order. He assessed the estimated time to complete the job, that all information was on hand, and sufficient manpower was available to undertake the job.

A number of work orders were scheduled for a 24-hour turnaround due to the urgency of the project. The Manila office did not assess these cases in any detail. The work order that left the UK for delivery next day only allowed a normal working day and necessary overtime to complete the job by the Manila office.

The Design Manager and the CAD Specialist

Although David joined the company almost two years ago, he was still considered relatively new to the organization. His orientation program had never been completed and so he was still getting to grips with organizational norms, policies, and procedures. David was in his late fifties and Manila was his first overseas posting. He had previously owned and ran his own successful engineering consulting firm in the UK. He described his management style as collaborative. He always encouraged the younger staff to take on more responsibility and develop themselves further. He was proud of the fact that three of the engineers in his UK firm had completed Masters' degrees under his guidance and encouragement. He felt this way of managing was more effective and so continued to use this same style with the staff in Manila.

Tony was in his mid-thirties, a senior CAD Specialist who had been with MDS for four years working in the Manila office. Tony had a degree in architecture and was considered to be a hard-worker as well as a capable CAD Specialist.

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A work order was received from the UK and assessed by David, the Design Manager, as a 24-hour turn around project. On this occasion, David sent a confirmatory email back to the UK that acknowledged receipt of the order, confirmation of time allotted to complete the work and required delivery time to allow Andrew, the Director, to confirm the presentation material to be available in time for the prescribed meeting in the UK.

The work instruction was given in Manila at 9:00 a.m. to Joe, the Design Engineer, and then passed on to Tony, the CAD Specialist, who received the package of work at 10:00 a.m. Joe knew the package was important and reviewed the final work content with Tony. This was done right away because there was little chance to review the work after this time due to other commitments. Joe, Tony, and David all agreed that 5:00 p.m. was the fixed target for completion. David emphasized how important this was and asked Tony again for reassurance that he could finish in time without further help. "Yes," Tony smiled, through pursed lips. After lunch, David asked Tony how work was progressing. Everything appeared to be on target and so David turned his attention to a series of meetings he had to attend. He knew he was going to be busy until 5:00 p.m.

Table 1 - Work Flow Timeline in Manila

9.00am	10.00am	5.00pm
Work order Received	Package of work received	Fixed target Completion

By the time David had finished his meetings, he went over to the CAD department to see Tony, but Tony had already left for the day with the work unfinished and no explanation! In reviewing the unfinished work, David estimated that it would take at least another two hours to complete. This meant that delivery to the London office would not meet the UK deadline at noon. This created a ripple effect in the company work flow. So, he decided to reassign the work to the following day's schedule.

This was not an isolated incident in the organization but this was the first time Tony had failed to meet a deadline commitment. David was determined that things were going to change. He did not want this type of behavior to continue so he needed to do something about it. It was putting the reputation and credibility of the Manila office on the line. David knew he had to put a stop to these missed deadlines now because a missed deadline in Manila causes a backlog in London which in turn causes angry customers.

So, David had already explained to Andrew in London why the deadline was missed in Manila. He knew he had to get to the bottom of why cut-off times are being missed and decide on what changes need to be acted upon.