

Being the Owner

You’ve probably heard people talk about “taking ownership” of your work. What does that actually mean, anyway? Owning your work means that you’re not just executing a series of activities that someone else assigns you, but rather that you’re truly responsible for the success of your realm – that you’re the person who obsesses over details and progress and figures out how to drive the work forward.

That means doing things like:

- Making sure you have all the information you need to complete your work successfully – and seeking it out if you don’t
- Figuring out what needs to happen to make your work successful, proposing next steps, spotting problems or potential problems, and proposing solutions to those problems
- Making it easy for your manager to get the information they need as the work progresses
- Being accountable for your results and drawing lessons for next time

What Ownership Looks Like		
The situation	Great!	Not so great...
Your printing vendor can’t get invites for your gala done by your mail drop date	You call other printers to find one who can meet your deadline and loop your manager in if you need new costs approved	You tell your manager that you have to change the mail date because your vendor didn’t come through
You need to get co-sponsors for your bill	You ask people with connections to legislators if they can set meetings up, you call every office to try to talk to staffers, you enlist an intern to find every instance in the last five years that a legislator voiced support for your cause...	You call a bunch of offices to try to set up meetings, but give up and tell your manager that you’re not getting any bites
You see a news story about an aspect of your issue that you’re writing an email alert about	You forward it to your communications team and ask if it impacts the alert you’re writing	You write and send the alert as you were planning, figuring that if the news were important, someone would tell you
You’re trying to get 20 major donors to attend your gala, but you’re worried that your team’s development officer isn’t communicating with them	You voice your concerns to your manager, indicating that you’re not certain there’s an issue, but you think there might be	You assume that the development officer is doing their job and that you have nothing to worry about
You need five more \$1,000 donors to meet your goal	You start reading industry websites, looking for ideas that your organization hasn’t thought of or used before	You tell your boss that there just aren’t any more likely \$1,000 donors in your donor universe

Ownership in Action

Let's take a look at what ownership looks like in action.

I. At the Outset: Agreeing on Expectations

Most of the time, when your manager assigns you a responsibility, they probably have a general idea of what success will look like. However, in the rush of day-to-day work, they might not always share that with you clearly (or even have finished thinking it through themselves). You'll dramatically increase the success of your project if you make sure *on the front end* that you're both on the same page about their expectations.

1. One way to suss out what your manager is thinking is to use the 5 W's: who, what, when, where, and why. Even if your manager only has vague ideas of what they're looking for, talking through those ideas in advance will prevent you from wasting time by inadvertently going in a completely different direction.

To illustrate ownership using a real-life situation, let's use the example of a development associate in charge of an upcoming gala.

The 5 W's	What it means	What it looks like
Who	Who else is involved in this project? Who can help you with the work, and who needs to be consulted?	Your manager, the ED, three fundraising officers, and the communications team
What	What exactly does success look like? How will you know success when you see it?	150 prospecting targets attend, including 5 high-value prospects; all logistics run smoothly; attendees get a highly professional, polished image of the organization.
When	When is the assignment due? When do specific benchmarks need to be reached?	Venue selected by X, invitations mailed by Y, personal outreach completed by Z, and other interim deadlines
Where	Where else can you go for resources to help with this project? What other departments have information you'll need?	The 2011 gala set the record for attendance, so reading over work plans for that event is useful
Why	Why is this project important? How does it drive the mission forward?	The gala will increase awareness of our issue and organization, build relationships with top prospects, and generate revenue.

2. Do a Repeat-Back. At the end of your conversation with your manager, give them a quick summary of what you're taking away from the conversation – a “repeat-back” – which will help you both spot places where you might be out of alignment. You can either do this verbally at the end of the meeting (if it's fairly straightforward), or email it over right afterwards (if it's a bit more complicated).

II. Planning and Doing the Work

Of course, the biggest thing about owning the work is actually driving it from idea to reality. There are lots of tools you can use in the process.

1. Create a plan (usually). To stay on top of a project, you'll often need to put together a written plan listing what needs to happen, by whom, and by when. For a major project, you might create an entire project plan, filled with deadlines (for yourself as well as other people involved!), descriptions, and details. Such a plan can really help you keep track of lots of moving parts; however, it's not always necessary to generate so much detail for every project. For smaller tasks, just start at the end: to get the result you want, what actions will you need to take and how much time will you need to spend on them? How will that time fit into your coming days and weeks? Create workblocks for projects on your calendar, so you can ensure the work gets done and get a clearer idea of how much time you *really* have to work on new items. (In doing this, you might discover that other priorities mean that you don't actually have as much time as you thought – and that's good to figure out early on, so that you can plan accordingly.)

2. Use your manager as a resource. Make sure that you're checking in with your manager regularly over the course of the project so that the two of you can monitor progress, discuss challenges and possible obstacles, and review slices of the work as it unfolds.

Do some prep work before these meetings to figure out how to get the most from the time. You should come prepared with a list of items you want to discuss (after all, the responsibility for thinking through the work and what you need should be yours, not theirs). For instance: "I wanted to start with the question of whether we need a hotel venue, or if we ought to be looking at other spaces as well."

3. Be clear when assigning roles to others. If you'll need other people to play various roles in the work (from consulting on ideas to signing off to actually doing some of the work themselves), make sure that everyone is clear on what role you need them to play.

The "MOCHA" model (below) can help you clearly articulate who should play what role throughout the course of work.. (Your manager is probably the "M" and maybe the "A," but it can be helpful to talk through the MOCHA with your manager to get clarity on who else might be involved and what role they should play.)

MANAGER | Assigns responsibility and holds owner accountable. Makes suggestions, asks hard questions, reviews progress, serves as a resource, and intervenes if the work is off-track.

OWNER | Has overall responsibility for the success or failure of the project. Ensures that all the work gets done (directly or with helpers) and that others are involved appropriately. There should only be **one** owner.

CONSULTED | Should be asked for input or needs to be bought in to the project.

HELPER | Assists with or does some of the work.

APPROVER | Signs off on decisions before they're final. May be the manager, though might also be the executive director, external partner, or board chair.

Engage your "Cs." Consulteds are included in your MOCHA because they have valuable input! Identify what you need from each of them, ask them for it, and let them know if you need anything else (or decide not to use their input). For the gala, a Consulted might be your communications director, who needs to sign off on the website copy text to ensure it's consistent with the organization's branding and voice.

Delegate to "Hs." Helpers are there to help you do the work. In our example, one helper might be the development assistant, who is coordinating the invitation process. You'll need to check in with them to make sure the invitations look the way they should and are mailed on time, but they help you get the work done.

4. Bring solutions. If there's a glitch in the plan, bring your manager into the loop and have a solution ready to propose. If your graphic designer is suddenly unavailable, that's a significant issue that your manager should know about. But when you tell them, ideally you would already have a recommendation of who could take over the project.

III. Reflecting and Learning

When the project is over, don't move on just yet! If you spend some time reflecting on the work, what went well, and what could have gone better, you'll capture important lessons that will help your organization gets better results in the future – as well as developing your own skills for next time.

1. Debrief. Set up a time to debrief the project with your manager and anyone else who played a significant role in it. Taking the time to look at what you learned over the course of the project (while it's still fresh in your mind) allows you to capture valuable lessons for the future. Look back at the original expectations you and your manager set (what you decided success looks like). How well does that match against what actually happened? What have you learned that will be useful for next time? How can you make sure that knowledge is captured and incorporated going forward?

For example, maybe the master of ceremonies was a bit late for the event, and you didn't have a contingency plan for how to fill that time or ensure that the rest of the program remained on-schedule. What could you have done differently to avoid that? And how can you capture that information so that you (or whoever else might be in charge next year) will be better prepared next time?

2. Ask for feedback. In addition to talking out the successes and issues of the project itself, make sure to ask your manager for feedback on your own work. What was done well? What could have been done better? Your manager might offer you these thoughts proactively, but if they don't, ask them for feedback! You can also get feedback from others in the project; for example, maybe the development assistant felt they didn't have as much direction as they would have liked on the invitation process, and that's something you can improve for other projects. Talking through how the work went will help you do even better in the future.