

When You Have to Assign Work No One Wants to Do

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A manager assigns a team member to an unglamorous task. A senior colleague hands off a notoriously difficult client to a junior colleague. Someone must assume extra responsibilities to cover for a teammate on leave.

These situations are routine in organizations: Sometimes work simply needs to get done, which often means employees must do things they don't necessarily want to do. Yet leaders still depend on enthusiasm, effort, and buy-in from people who didn't volunteer for these assignments. Many managers respond by treating the conversation like a sales pitch—highlighting the business case, offering incentives, or dangling future opportunities. Others rely on authority, using pressure or hierarchy to secure compliance.

But our research points to something different: what matters most is acceptance. When managers understand how acceptance works, they can structure conversations so that employees genuinely commit.

The Psychology of Acceptance

People naturally rationalize their choices. After deciding, they focus on the upsides, discount the downsides, and feel increasingly satisfied with what they picked. Psychologists have long documented this tendency: when our behavior and beliefs don't line up, it creates cognitive dissonance, and our attitudes typically adjust to restore consistency.

But what happens when workers don't choose outcomes for themselves—when they're assigned things they wouldn't have selected? Our research demonstrates that a similar process can unfold. It turns out that what matters is not whether someone had a say in their assignment, but whether they accept that "this is what I will be doing."

Acceptance doesn't necessarily mean liking the assignment. It means acknowledging it as the reality one will live with—feeling that the outcome is resolved and settled, rather than tentative or negotiable. When acceptance is high, people tend to downplay the unattractive features of the assignment and elevate the attractive ones. When acceptance is low, they ruminate, resist, or remain half-in, half-out—behaviors that undermine performance and commitment.

One way to think about this: acceptance moves people from "this is not happening" to "this is happening." This mental shift can change how employees experience and evaluate the same outcome.

What the Research Shows

In our recent article published in *Psychological Review*, we report findings from seven experiments involving more than 2,500 participants, showing that people can rationalize outcomes they didn't choose for themselves. Across these studies, participants first evaluated two similar options (such as unfamiliar brands). After a delay, they were assigned one of the options and later asked to evaluate both again—mirroring workplace situations in which employees are assigned projects, clients, or roles they didn't request.

We consistently found that attitudes shifted in favor of the assigned option, and that this shift was strongest when individuals felt accepting of the outcome. But what made people feel accepting? Our research identified three key factors.

Perceived freedom

Workers are more accepting when they feel they have some choice. In one experiment, participants first rated two unfamiliar brands. One week later, they were told they would act as a salesperson for one of those brands. Although everyone was ultimately assigned a brand at random, some participants were told that they had chosen it a week earlier, while others were explicitly told it had been assigned. When participants later re-evaluated both brands, they rated their assigned brand more favorably than the alternative, especially when they believed they had chosen it.

Finality

Employees are more accepting when an outcome feels final and "locked in." In another experiment, some participants were told that the assignment was final, while others were told it was provisional and might change. When re-evaluating both brands later, those who believed the assignment was final rated their assigned brand more favorably than those who believed it could still change.

Process legitimacy

Acceptance depends on consent to the process that produced the assignment and a belief that the allocation was fair. Participants in a different experiment were led to believe they would be able to choose their outcome, only to have their freedom to choose later revoked, while others were simply assigned the same outcome. Even though everyone received the identical outcome, those whose freedom of choice was revoked felt less positively toward it. The outcome felt fair when it was simply assigned, but not when the freedom to choose was taken away.

Three Questions to Ask Before Making Assignments

How can managers leverage acceptance to promote buy-in, especially when they must assign work that doesn't excite their employees? Before you assign a demanding task, shift a team's priorities, or deliver unwelcome news, ask yourself three questions.

1. Have I built in any meaningful freedom—however small—around this assignment?

When people feel they have some control, they're more likely to accept the outcome and subsequently rationalize it. In our research, perceived choice increased rationalization even when options were constrained or the "choice" was symbolic. Could the employee choose certain aspects of the work, influence the timing or scope, or at least voice concerns that meaningfully shape the outcome? Offering a choice may not always be possible, but allowing for some discretion can help.

Even when the "what" is nonnegotiable, giving people meaningful control over the "how" can make the difference between reluctant compliance and genuine buy-in. Without some perception of freedom, you may inadvertently undermine the acceptance that ultimately promotes buy-in.

2. Does this assignment feel truly settled, or am I keeping it ambiguously "up in the air"?

Ambiguity may feel compassionate, but it can delay acceptance. Leaders often think they're being kind by softening bad news: "Let's try this for now and see" or "We'll revisit this in a few months." Yet our experiments suggest that when employees believe an assignment is provisional, they're less inclined to rationalize it.

When an outcome feels final, people are more likely to accept it and mentally adjust. If you need commitment, signal finality rather than leaving things open-ended. This is especially important when communicating bad news: cutting to the chase is more effective than stringing someone along.

3. Have I made the assignment process feel legitimate?

Even when outcomes are nonnegotiable, team members care deeply about how those outcomes are determined. In our research, people were more accepting of outcomes when they believed the process that produced them was reasonable and when their autonomy wasn't explicitly undermined. In organizations, legitimacy often hinges on transparency and consistency in how decisions are made.

Do employees understand how and why work is allocated—who decides, what criteria matter, and how decisions are made? For example, a manager assigning a difficult client might say, “We allocate client accounts based on experience with similar customers. That’s why this one is assigned to you.” When people understand the logic behind a decision and see it applied consistently, they’re more likely to accept the outcome, even if they don’t like it. When people instead view the process as unfair or unreasonable, they’re less likely to accept the outcome, and attempts to “sell” them on the assignment may fall flat.

The Bottom Line

Leaders can’t ensure that employees like every assignment. Ironically, many well-intentioned managerial behaviors—overexplaining, overselling, or leaving decisions deliberately vague—can undermine acceptance rather than increase it. Such strategies can prevent buy-in.

But by offering real (if bounded) freedom, signaling finality when decisions are made, and making the allocation process feel legitimate, they can foster the acceptance that allows people to genuinely commit—even when they wouldn’t have chosen that assignment for themselves.