

UNITED WISDOM

When putting something off signals a real conflict of interests

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *Subjects were less likely to act*

Robert Emmons and Laura King, 1988, abstract, description of Study 3. A short excerpt about acting on the participants' conflicting or ambivalent strivings. The observation does not establish the cause of an individual delay.

What this article is about

Imagine Irina, who has spent three weeks putting off her answer to an offer to lead a new project. The work interests her, she has the skills, and the terms have been discussed. Accepting, however, would mean evening meetings at a time when she shares the care of a relative with her sister. Every day she promises herself she will send the email. A question about two commitments gradually turns into an accusation: why can I never get myself together? This is an invented scene, rather than an account of a studied case.

A delay sometimes occurs where two important interests are hard to reconcile. Starting faster is then insufficient: the person needs to establish what clashes, who bears the cost, and which condition could change. Yet the delay itself proves none of this. We will consider how to move from a suspicion to a description that can be checked, retain authorship of a decision, and take other participants into account. The result might be action, a new agreement, a limited pause, or a refusal. The article offers no diagnosis, legal determination, or way to read another person's motives.

I. What the word later leaves unresolved

The word later is convenient because it allows several promises to remain in place at once. Irina has neither declined the project nor acknowledged that the existing care schedule may need to change. Until she sends the email, both possibilities seem open. Meanwhile, her sister plans her week, the manager looks for someone to do the work, and Irina's attention is repeatedly drawn back to the same question. A decision that has yet to be made also has consequences, although they may not be immediately visible.

There could be different explanations for this scene. Irina may not understand the authority attached to the new role. She may not have had time to read the offer. She may be tired or

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uneasy about negotiating. A conflict of interests cannot be declared the cause simply because it makes a convincing story. First, the known conditions need to be separated from guesses: the invitation arrived, the answer is delayed, the meetings are in the evenings, and the family agreement occupies the same hours. Those conditions can be checked.

A more precise question follows. If the technical difficulty of the email were removed and Irina had a quiet half hour, would the clash of commitments remain? This is not a diagnostic test. It merely helps identify whether the situation also requires a decision about allocating time. Sometimes the email still goes unsent and the cause remains unclear. That is an honest result of reflection, rather than a reason to complete a hidden story.

Naming a conflict helps when it makes the description more precise. The name becomes an obstacle when it replaces the description. Saying that there is a conflict of interests should allow a continuation: which interests, in connection with what action, and at whose expense? If that continuation is unavailable, it is reasonable to keep the question open. A delay primarily tells us that an action has not happened. Other meanings require separate grounds, including the person's own account and the specific conditions of the task.

II. Both goals may belong to the same person

It is easy to discuss a conflict as though one side represented a real wish and the other had been imposed from outside. For Irina, that could become a struggle between her own development and someone else's obligation. Yet she may value both her work and her contribution to care. Both goals then belong to her. Requiring her to identify the authentic side in advance excludes part of her own life and makes the choice cruder than the situation itself.

We suggest distinguishing the importance of goals from the compatibility of actions. Two goals can matter at the same time while the particular ways of pursuing them occupy the same hours. This does not establish that the goals are incompatible in every form. Evening meetings may be a team habit rather than a project necessity. Care may require Irina's presence on a particular evening rather than every day. A conflict changes when the ways of fulfilling commitments change, even if the underlying values remain the same.

Psychologists Robert Emmons and Laura King investigated conflict and ambivalence among personal strivings. The published description of their third study reports a lower likelihood of acting on such strivings and more time thinking about them. This observation comes from a student sample. It neither establishes the cause of a particular postponement nor allows us to read Irina's intentions. It provides limited research support for asking about a clash of goals in the first place. Emmons and King, 1988.

The useful next step is to name both goals without condemning one of them. Professional development and caring for a relative can both have a claim on attention. Their conditions can

then be examined. This approach does not guarantee compatibility, but it does not require a person first to label some of their own strivings false. If one interest can be preserved only at the expense of another, that needs to become clear enough for a choice, rather than prompting a search for perfect wording that would abolish the constraint.

III. A conflict takes shape in a specific condition

Interests described too broadly can seem to conflict with everything. Wanting freedom and needing to be dependable do not yet reveal the decision at hand. Let us narrow Irina's scene: the new role requires two evening meetings each week, while the existing agreement with her sister requires her presence on one of those evenings. Time, substitution, frequency, and the duration of the terms can now be discussed. The conversation stops being a debate about the kind of person Irina ought to become.

Precision does not mean that everything can be expressed in numbers. The other side of a conflict may concern the unacceptable content of an action. Imagine another fictional person, an editor asked to sign off a piece as verified even though he has not seen its sources. His wish to finish the issue clashes with his commitment to answer for his own signature. An extra hour in the calendar would not necessarily settle this question: he needs access to the grounds for the claim or a change in what his signature certifies. This is an example of a distinction, rather than a determination of professional standards in a particular industry.

A description of a conflict therefore needs to connect an interest to an action. What would have to be done or missed? Which result would be claimed as one's own? Who expects delivery? How are time, authority, or access constrained? If the answers reveal only general unease, further inquiry remains necessary. If they reveal two incompatible requirements for one action, there is something specific to decide.

Here, conflict of interests is used in the ordinary sense of a clash between important interests and commitments. It does not establish a formal professional conflict of interest. Where that status is at issue, applicable rules and the relevant assessment determine it. Everyday reflection neither assigns that status to a person nor removes it.

It also helps to identify a condition under which the clash would disappear. For Irina, that might be moving one meeting. For the editor, it might be checking the grounds before signing. The condition need not already be available. Its purpose is to locate the boundary between a shortage of time, the content of a commitment, and a lack of authority. A change can then be sought where it bears on the problem, instead of issuing a general demand to become more organised.

IV. Someone else may bear the cost of a decision

If Irina simply accepts the project and stops coming on the previously agreed evening, her calendar becomes freer. The care does not disappear. Her sister might take it on, paid help might be needed, or part of the care might go undone. The decision has become easier for one participant because some of its cost has moved to another. This does not make the new role unacceptable, but it changes what consent needs to address.

We suggest examining the transfer of a burden separately from one's own readiness. A person may be willing to work more, yet the new arrangement affects a partner's time, a colleague's peace of mind, or family resources. Choosing one's own goals does not automatically supply someone else's agreement. Where an action depends on another person's contribution, their ability to decline needs to be present in the terms, rather than assumed from previous closeness or cooperation.

This examination does not require revealing one's entire private life to everyone. Irina can tell the project manager which evening hours are unavailable and what form of participation might be possible. Her reasons may remain private. Her sister needs a conversation about care and the new burden, rather than details of every work meeting. The information that is sufficient depends on the decision that participant faces. Other people's curiosity does not in itself create a right to an explanation.

It helps to distinguish a request from a decision already taken. Asking whether someone can take an evening for a month leaves room for an answer. Announcing that one has accepted and that the other person will have to provide cover effectively transfers a choice they never made. Urgent circumstances sometimes narrow the room for negotiation, but urgency does not abolish the cost. Where possible, it helps to say what is changing temporarily, for how long, and when the allocation will be reviewed. Dependability here concerns a clear promise and advance notice, rather than the ability to fulfil every expectation at once.

V. A pause and a refusal have different consequences

While Irina postpones her answer, the manager may understand her to be considering the offer. If she has already decided to decline but keeps promising an email tomorrow, the manager retains an inaccurate impression of an available project leader. This is no reason to demand an immediate decision. It is a reason to notice which information other people need for their own actions and what answer is actually possible now.

A pause can be an agreement in its own right: three days are needed to check the schedule and talk to the participants. It helps to identify what should become clearer during those days and when another answer is expected. A refusal says something different: under the current

terms, the commitment will not be taken on. Negotiation says something else again: participation can be considered if a specific condition changes. Different answers create different possibilities for others, so they cannot indefinitely be replaced with an undefined later.

Clarity is not always safe, however. Under pressure, a person may be unable to refuse directly or discuss interests on equal terms. The priority is then to preserve safety and seek available support. This article does not determine how someone should respond to threats or make openness a duty. A limited message, temporary silence, or declining this reflection may be necessary in particular circumstances.

In an ordinary voluntary agreement, a narrower question is useful: what can I honestly communicate now without promising something that remains undecided? Irina can say that the offer interests her but that the existing schedule does not yet allow her to accept. She need not already know the final answer. It is enough to avoid turning interest into a promise or presenting a hoped-for change in conditions as agreement already obtained. Such an answer retains uncertainty where it exists and reduces it where another participant needs a comprehensible account of the negotiations.

VI. Improving an action or reconsidering its goal

Ordinary ways of getting started help when an action has already been chosen and the obstacle concerns execution. Time can be set aside, the first step clarified, and the necessary materials prepared. But if sending the email means accepting an incompatible commitment, reducing the task to a single click does not remove the conflict. A small step can sometimes make a large agreement too easy to overlook. Before simplifying an action, it helps to understand what that action establishes.

In Book III of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle distinguishes wishing for an end from deliberating about the means of attaining it. In discussing medicine or government, the end is assumed and the route towards it is investigated. This is a historical ethical argument, rather than a modern model of procrastination. For our situation, the boundary of the question is useful: if the difficulty concerns an accepted goal, searching for a more convenient means may be insufficient. Aristotle, III.2–3, translated by W. D. Ross.

Irina could refine the email indefinitely while still facing the question of the new role. It makes sense here to pause the optimisation of the method and ask which outcome she is willing to promise. Reconsideration may concern scale: leading part of the project rather than all of it. It may concern timing: starting after the present period of family care. It may address the goal itself: choosing a different professional opportunity. These possibilities are not deductions

from the ancient text. They are the article authors' application of the distinction to an invented scene.

Reconsideration does not mean that every difficult undertaking should be declared someone else's goal. Difficulty in execution remains a separate question. If Irina accepts the role and its terms but cannot yet perform a new operation, learning bears directly on the task. If she has the skill but lacks the hours, resources need to be discussed. Several obstacles may exist together. The purpose of the distinction is to make help answer the actual question, rather than select a convenient explanation permanently and stop observing the situation.

VII. Negotiation needs a subject and a boundary

Asking everyone to find a compromise can sound conciliatory while giving them too little information to answer. What exactly should change? Irina might propose a daytime call, a written response instead of the second meeting, or a limited first month. The manager might agree, offer another option, or explain why these terms are incompatible with the task. A discussion of real possibilities then replaces a test of each side's willingness to make concessions.

It helps to connect a proposal to the limit of the commitment. If Irina will take the project only with a daytime schedule, that condition needs to precede acceptance. Otherwise, the team might interpret her participation as ordinary availability and a later reminder as a change to the agreement. Conditions do not guarantee freedom from disputes, but they help establish what the parties were trying to agree. For significant formal obligations, the necessary ways of recording terms are determined by the relevant rules, rather than this article.

A concession also has a boundary. Irina's sister may be able to take an extra evening for two weeks rather than the whole project. The team may be able to move one meeting but unable to accommodate its leader's continuing absence. Sometimes there is no shared option. Acknowledging incompatibility is then more precise than maintaining an agreement understood differently by each party. Declining this combination of terms leaves open the possibility of another arrangement, without requiring an endless search for one.

Negotiation also needs room to check consequences. An initial arrangement can seem acceptable, only for underestimated burdens to appear two weeks later. A review date helps when the parties can actually change something. It should not become a promise with no way out. It is better to establish in advance what can be reviewed, who makes the decision, and which commitments can no longer be cancelled through a simple exchange of messages. A trial then remains limited in subject and duration, rather than becoming indefinite consent under another name.

VIII. A conflict cannot be assigned on someone else's behalf

Suppose a colleague notices Irina's delay and tells her she is actually afraid of success. Another insists that she is protecting her family from work. Both versions may sound plausible, but neither follows from the delay. Even an observer who knows some of the conditions has no direct access to how Irina evaluates her goals or which conversations have already taken place. Explaining someone else's behaviour can quietly become a way of demanding a convenient decision.

Help begins from a more modest position. One can ask whether a term in the offer is hard to reconcile with another commitment and whether the person wants to discuss it at all. One can provide information about the schedule or help formulate a question for the manager. No answer does not prove a suppressed motive. Privacy, fatigue, distrust, or a lack of clarity remain possible circumstances that cannot confidently be selected from outside.

The same boundary applies to one's own reflection. A convincing explanation may appeal because it removes an unpleasant accusation of laziness. Relief, however, does not in itself confirm an explanation. It helps to check whether the account fits observable conditions: are there really two demands on the same time, result, or authority? Would changing the identified condition change the situation? If not, the hypothesis should be refined rather than defended as a new story about one's personality.

At the same time, lacking a clear explanation does not oblige a person to agree. An offer can be declined without constructing an exhaustive theory of one's motives. Discussing reasons can help someone choose and negotiate; it is not an examination that grants the right to have boundaries. Where professional assessments of behaviour, capability, or legal consequences are required, their own procedures and competences apply. A personal article does not replace them or grant an observer authority they did not previously have.

IX. Naming the conflict still leaves a choice

Understanding a clash of goals can feel good: the delay finally has an explanation. Yet an explanation does not allocate evening hours or answer the manager. The next question is which decision is available under the conditions already known. Irina might accept after an agreed change to the schedule, decline, request a limited pause, or choose another form of participation. Each option preserves something and gives something up.

There is a temptation here to seek a choice without loss. Sometimes compatibility can indeed be restored, making negotiation worthwhile. Sometimes the loss remains: someone else gets the role, participation in care is reduced, or income does not grow as soon as expected. Acknowledging the cost does not establish that a decision is wrong. It means seeing why an

option is being accepted and which consequences still require attention. Sadness about the path not taken can accompany a clear choice without undoing it.

It also helps to distinguish one's own cost from a cost proposed for others. Irina can assess her additional working time. Changing her sister's schedule, however, needs her sister's separate agreement where this is a voluntary arrangement. A joint decision may allocate losses unevenly. It matters that the distribution be visible and open to discussion within the possibilities available. The word compromise alone does not reveal who conceded what or what they received in return.

The reflection can end when a sufficiently definite next state becomes possible. An answer has been sent, a question addressed to someone with the necessary authority, the terms of a pause identified, or a refusal communicated in an appropriate form. This is a narrow result, rather than proof of complete inner agreement. The decision may remain difficult. If every further reflection returns the same information without changing the available options, it is reasonable to limit more thought and choose a date for the next check. New facts can then have their chance to affect the decision, while repeating familiar arguments stops taking up all the time.

X. A decision can change without a new story about the self

Imagine that Irina arranges daytime meetings, accepts the role, and discovers an unexpected workload a month later. This does not necessarily mean that the initial conflict was invented or that she misunderstood her own wishes. The information and conditions at the start differed from those that appeared later. It makes sense to connect reconsideration to that difference, instead of turning every change of decision into a verdict on one's maturity or dependability.

For such reconsideration, it helps to remember which condition was considered essential. If the daytime schedule remains but the workload grows, the workload needs discussing. If the workload is unchanged but meetings move to the evening, a condition of acceptance has changed. If the family situation becomes different, a new conversation with those affected is needed. Precision helps distinguish a change of circumstances from dissatisfaction that may have been there from the outset. It does not require denying that one's preferences can also change.

Sometimes it later becomes clear that a person accepted a goal they did not endorse. That uncomfortable discovery can also be considered without an accusatory story. It matters more to establish what can still change and who needs to be told about the consequences. Recognising earlier disagreement does not automatically cancel obligations that have already arisen. Possible ways out depend on the kind of agreement. The article proposes raising the question, rather than declaring every consequence ended through an internal decision alone.

At the beginning, Irina asked why she could never get herself together. The question can now become more precise: what commitment am I willing to accept, which condition needs to change, and who participates in changing it? Putting something off has become a reason to investigate, rather than evidence of a secret motive. Such an investigation sometimes leads to action and sometimes to refusal. Its value lies in making the decision sufficiently comprehensible to the person and to participants who need information about a shared undertaking. This is the article authors' guiding suggestion, rather than a promise that every conflict can be resolved.

What this means in practice

If you would like to try this reflection, choose one small postponed decision that can be discussed without threats or coercion. Do not begin by asking why you always put everything off. Name a specific action and the consequences of carrying it out, such as accepting a role with two evening meetings. Then separate known conditions from your assumptions about the delay. Where too little is known about the terms, asking about them may be the first result.

Try writing down two interests or commitments you suspect are in conflict. Specify where the clash occurs: time, the content of a result, resources, or authority. Name a condition whose alteration could make the action acceptable. The note does not prove the cause of the delay; it prepares a subject for investigation. If the second side cannot yet be formulated, you can stop there and retain the uncertainty.

Separately consider who bears the cost of each option. Do not transfer your own readiness to another person. If their contribution is needed, think about a question that lets them give a real answer, including a refusal. You need not disclose private motives beyond what is necessary. A conversation about a schedule often needs only the boundary of availability and a possible proposal. For significant legal, financial, or professional consequences, use suitable assistance and the applicable procedures.

Limit the trial in time, perhaps to one calm discussion or fifteen minutes of writing for yourself. Choose one available outcome: request information, propose a condition, communicate the duration of a pause, make a decision, or decline. The reflection has been useful if the commitment at hand and what still needs agreement become clearer. Sending a message does not by itself prove that the conflict has been resolved; the other person's answer may change the options.

Stop if the trial creates dangerous pressure, requires disclosure of protected information, or turns into a demand to explain yourself to someone with whom that is unsafe. You may choose not to do this reflection. After a voluntary trial, one review date can be set to check whether conditions have changed. A refusal's sincerity need not be proved through prolonged

self-analysis. An available decision, an honest limit to a promise, and attention to the consequences that actually depend on your action are enough for this bounded exercise.

Key quotation

> *spend more time thinking*

Robert Emmons and Laura King, 1988, abstract, final part of the description of Study 3. A short excerpt. In context, it concerns thinking about those same participants' conflicting or ambivalent strivings, rather than a general feature of everyone who postpones action.

Connections between traditions

Read sources	Comparison	Material boundary
Emmons and King on personal strivings ↔ Aristotle on ends and means, III.2–3	The description of a difficulty depends on which striving or action is being considered	A psychological study of students does not confirm ancient ethics; Aristotle does not explain modern delays and takes the end as given in this passage
Emmons and King ↔ the authors' examination of a shared commitment	A clash of strivings permits a question about incompatible requirements	The observation about personal strivings establishes no duties to other people; checking consent and the transfer of burdens is the article authors' suggestion
Aristotle, III.3 ↔ reconsidering an accepted role	Searching for means and discussing the goal itself require different questions	Reconsidering the goal lies beyond the subject of the discussion of means considered here; it is not attributed to Aristotle as a ready-made technique

A similarity of questions does not turn these sources into one theory. The contemporary scenes and proposed order of inquiry belong to the article authors.

Sources

1. Robert A. Emmons, Laura A. King. Conflict Among Personal Strivings: Immediate and Long-Term Implications for Psychological and Physical Well-Being. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1988, 54(6), 1040–1048. DOI 10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1040. The complete authors' abstract and publication identity were read; the author-uploaded version identifies the text's provenance and warns of copyright. The article uses a limited observation about action and thought in relation to conflicting strivings. It establishes neither the cause of an individual delay nor clinical conclusions.

2. Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics, Book III, parts 2–3, translated by W. D. Ross. Both parts were read in full. The distinction between ends, choice, and deliberation about means is paraphrased without direct quotation. This historical ethical argument is not a study of procrastination and establishes no contemporary rules for relationships or leaving commitments.

Tags

Postponement, goal conflict, conflict of interests, personal strivings, commitment, consent, cost of a decision, distribution of burdens, negotiation, boundaries, privacy, uncertainty, reconsidering a goal, ends and means, accepting a role, work schedule, family agreement, voluntary trial, refusal, duration of a pause, transfer of responsibility, terms of participation, authorship of a decision, checking a hypothesis, Emmons, King, Aristotle, research limitations, joint action, right to stop.

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