

You Can't Do It All: Making Tradeoffs Under Competing Pressures

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EDU6335: Advanced Learning Design

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June 4, 2026

Introduction

My project focuses on designing an online learning module that helps professionals deal with competing pressures in complex work environments. It takes on a familiar problem in many workplaces: saying yes to too much when time, resources, and expectations aren't always clear. Throughout the module, learners will look at how tradeoffs play out in real decision-making situations and learn a practical way to evaluate priorities and communicate their choices more clearly. The goal is to move learners beyond just knowing that they can't do everything and help them feel more confident acting on that reality in a structured way.

Most professionals already know they can't do everything but knowing that and actually making tradeoff decisions in the moment are two very different things. When deadlines are moving, expectations are nebulous, and multiple people need something at once, it can be difficult to know what to prioritize or how to explain those decisions clearly. This module is meant to help learners think through those situations in a more structured way and practice making decisions that feel familiar to the kinds of pressures they experience at work.

Learner Analysis

The target audience for this module is early-to-mid career professionals working in project-based or knowledge-work environments where they regularly manage competing priorities, shifting expectations, deadlines, and stakeholder demands. Most of these learners have likely encountered competing pressures at work before but may not have a clear or consistent process for thinking through tradeoffs, setting priorities, or communicating decisions to others. Learners are expected to have:

- Some professional experience working on projects, team-based work, or competing deliverables

- Comfort learning in a self-paced online environment
- Basic communication skills

That said, many still struggle with prioritization because everything feels urgent or important, particularly in situations where disappointing others feels harder than taking on too much. From a cognitive perspective, these learners are generally capable of working with ambiguity, abstract thinking, and decision-making under pressure. However, repeatedly navigating competing demands can contribute to decision fatigue, making it harder to sustain thoughtful decision-making over time (Vohs et al., 2008).

On the affective side, workplace dynamics and social expectations may also influence how learners approach competing pressures. Many have experienced environments where saying yes, stepping up, taking one for the team, or responding after hours was rewarded, at least in the short term. In most workplaces, being consistently available or dependable is viewed as a strength, even when those expectations quietly become unsustainable. Research on organizational citizenship behavior suggests that employees who regularly go above and beyond may also experience increased strain and unrealistic expectations over time, even when those behaviors are socially reinforced (Bolino et al., 2010). Similarly, workplace environments characterized by high demands and limited resources can make it more difficult for employees to manage competing priorities effectively (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Because of this, learners may already understand the idea of prioritization in theory but still struggle to apply it in practice when multiple pressures are happening at once and there is no perfect solution.

Performance Context

Learners will use the skills from this module in professional settings where they are responsible for managing projects, deliverables, timelines, or competing expectations from stakeholders and team members.

These environments often involve:

- Competing priorities
- Limited time and resources
- Ambiguity and incomplete information
- Social and organizational pressure

Being successful in this kind of context is not just about making decisions; it also involves explaining those decisions clearly and maintaining trust with colleagues, supervisors, or stakeholders.

These skills may be used in situations such as responding to last-minute requests from leadership, managing shifting deadlines, balancing competing project expectations, or deciding what can realistically be completed when everything feels important. For example, a learner might be asked to take on a new request late in a project, respond to competing pressures from multiple stakeholders, or decide whether to prioritize speed, quality, accessibility, or scope when resources are limited.

In some workplaces, employees may also feel pressure to step up, stay late, or take on additional work in order to be viewed as dependable or “a team player,” even when doing so contributes to overload over time (Bolino et al., 2010). Research on workplace demands also suggests that high workloads, competing pressures, and limited resources can make prioritization

more difficult, especially when expectations are unclear or constantly shifting (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Learning Context

The module will be delivered as a self-paced, asynchronous online experience, giving learners the flexibility to move through the material on their own schedule.

The learning environment will emphasize:

- Applied thinking rather than memorization
- Reflection on how decisions are actually made
- Opportunities to work through context-rich scenarios

The focus is on helping learners practice thinking through real-world situations, not just absorbing information.

Cultural Context

The module assumes a professional culture where productivity, responsiveness, and collaboration are valued. In many workplaces, there is often unspoken pressure to say yes, stay available, or take on additional responsibilities, even when time and resources are limited. While being flexible or stepping up is generally viewed positively, workplace expectations that reward constant responsiveness can also contribute to burnout over time, particularly when competing demands are not acknowledged or communicated clearly (Bolino et al., 2010; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

At the same time, learners bring different personal and cultural experiences that shape how they approach competing pressures. For some, asking for support, pushing back, or saying no may feel uncomfortable or simply may not feel like an option. Others may have learned to avoid conflict, keep the peace, or place a high value on being dependable and helpful.

Because of this, the module does not treat prioritization as a purely logical exercise with one clearly correct answer. Instead, learners will work through scenarios where priorities compete, expectations are unclear, and tradeoffs are unavoidable. Through guided reflection and decision-making activities, learners will consider how workplace expectations, interpersonal pressures, and personal habits may shape the choices they make under competing demands.

Description of Module Content

The content of this module focuses on how people make decisions when there are real limits on time, resources, and attention, especially when tradeoffs are involved. It explores where competing priorities come from, why overcommitment happens so often, and what people can do to make clearer, more realistic decisions when everything feels important.

Because the goal of the module is to help learners navigate competing pressures rather than simply understand them, the content emphasizes decision-making situations and practical application over abstract discussion alone.

Key content areas include:

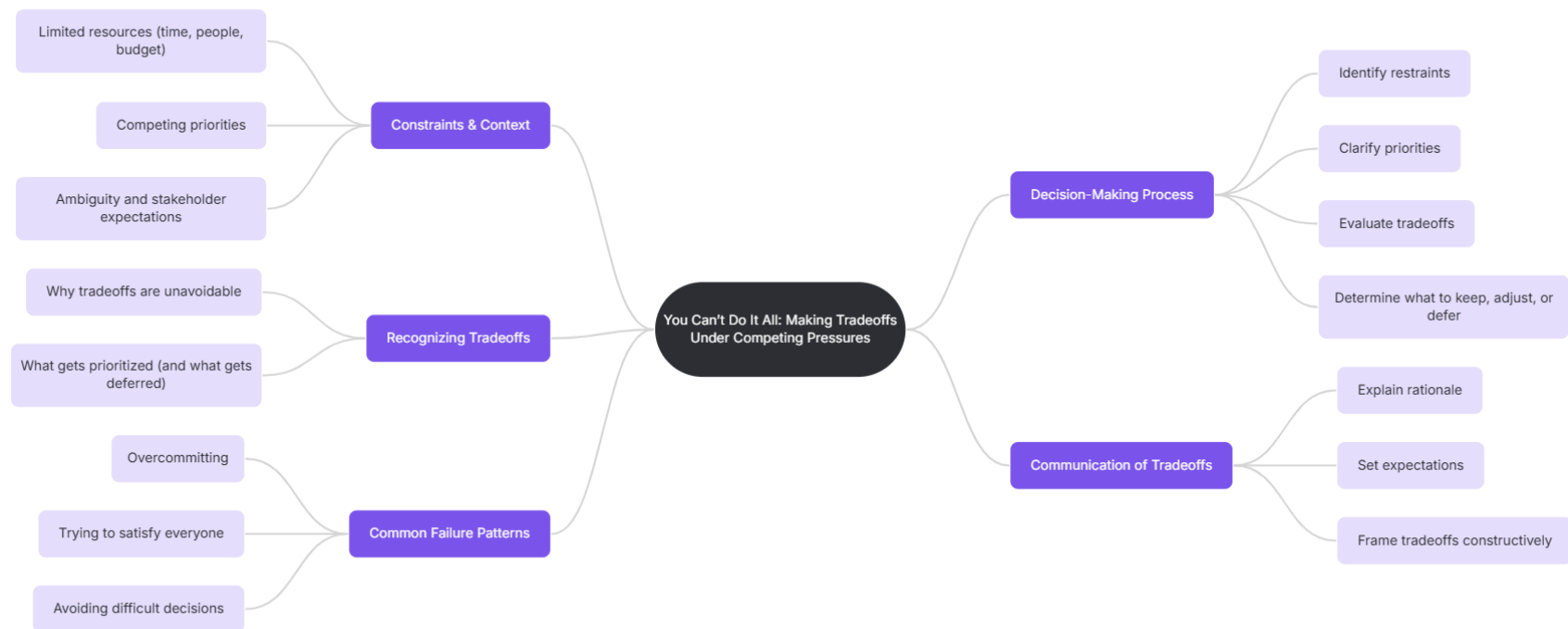
- The nature of constraints in professional environments
- Understanding tradeoffs and competing priorities
- Common failure patterns (such as overcommitting or avoiding difficult decisions)
- A structured process for evaluating priorities and making tradeoff decisions
- Strategies for communicating decisions clearly and managing expectations
- The outcomes of effective versus ineffective decision-making

The module emphasizes both the thinking side of decision-making (such as evaluating options and setting priorities) and the human side, including how workplace expectations, interpersonal dynamics, and discomfort with limits can shape choices under pressure.

The structured decision-making process introduced in the module asks learners to identify constraints, clarify priorities, evaluate competing demands, determine what can realistically be kept, adjusted, or deferred, and communicate tradeoffs clearly to stakeholders. Because workplace decisions are often messy and context-dependent, the emphasis is less on finding one correct answer and more on making thoughtful, defensible decisions within realistic constraints.

To maintain an achievable scope for a one-hour learning experience, the module focuses specifically on recognizing competing constraints, evaluating tradeoffs, and communicating decisions clearly. Related topics such as productivity, leadership, workplace wellness, or conflict management may overlap, but they are intentionally treated as supporting context rather than primary learning goals.

Figure 1
Content Analysis Summary (Concept Map)



Overall Instructional Goal

The goal of this module is to help professionals avoid overcommitting by using a structured approach to identify priorities and communicate tradeoffs clearly in complex work situations.

Progression of Instruction

The module will follow a scenario-based progression that places learners in a situation with competing priorities, limited resources, and competing expectations. As learners move through the module, they will work through a structured decision-making process one step at a time, applying concepts to increasingly complex situations.

The planned progression includes:

1. Introducing a familiar workplace scenario involving competing priorities and unclear expectations
2. Helping learners identify constraints, tradeoffs, and common failure patterns such as overcommitting or trying to satisfy everyone
3. Introducing a structured process for evaluating priorities and making tradeoff decisions
4. Giving learners opportunities to apply the process by weighing competing demands and deciding what to keep, adjust, or defer
5. Practicing how to communicate decisions and tradeoffs clearly to stakeholders

The progression moves learners from recognizing competing pressures to practicing decision-making in complex situations, while aligning learning outcomes, assessments, and instructional strategies. Because this topic involves judgment rather than one correct answer, the emphasis is on application, reflection, and making defensible decisions. A detailed lesson plan aligned to Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction is included in Appendix A.

Table 1
Alignment of Learning Outcomes, Assessments, and Instructional Strategies

Learning Outcome	Assessment	Instructional Strategy
Analyze competing constraints, including the ways time, resources, stakeholder expectations, and uncertainty influence workplace decisions.	Learners work through a workplace scenario and identify competing pressures, constraints, and common failure patterns.	Scenario-based learning, guided analysis, error spotting, reflective questioning
Evaluate competing demands and make tradeoff decisions about what should be prioritized, adjusted, or deferred.	Learners work through a prioritization activity where they weigh competing demands and explain tradeoff decisions in a realistic scenario.	Guided decision-making activity, tradeoff analysis, worked examples, scaffolded practice
Communicate a clear and defensible plan for explaining tradeoff decisions to stakeholders.	Learners respond to a workplace scenario by explaining decisions, setting expectations, and communicating tradeoffs to different stakeholders.	Scenario-based learning, authentic communication practice, guided reflection

Technology and Media Plan

The module is currently planned as a self-paced online experience built primarily in Rise with embedded Storyline interactions. Rise will be used to organize content and provide overall structure, while Storyline will support the more applied parts of the experience through scenarios, decision-making activities, and opportunities for learners to practice weighing tradeoffs in familiar situations.

Because the topic centers on judgment and competing priorities rather than memorization, the module emphasizes interaction and application over content-heavy instruction. Additional media may include simple visual frameworks, guided reflection prompts, and downloadable tools to help learners think through priorities and communicate decisions more clearly. Technology choices are being made based on what best supports practice and realism rather than adding interactivity for its own sake.

Assumptions About Learning, Theory Base, and Pedagogical Approaches

This module is informed primarily by constructivist perspectives, with some support from cognitivist principles. The module is built on the idea that learners develop stronger understanding when they actively work through situations that resemble challenges they already encounter at work. Because real workplace decisions are rarely neat or straightforward, the learning experience focuses on competing priorities, uncertainty, and choices that feel true to what actually happens at work.

At the same time, cognitivist principles shape the structure of the module. Learners will be given simple supports, such as a repeatable decision-making process, guided reflection, and worked examples, to help them organize information and think through competing priorities in a structured way.

Instructionally, the module relies mostly on scenario-based learning, reflection, and application. Learners will evaluate situations, weigh competing demands, and justify decisions in contexts that resemble a professional environment. This approach aligns with recommendations for e-learning that emphasize practice in realistic situations rather than simply recalling information, particularly when the goal is to support real-world application and transfer (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

Implementation Plan

Since this module is designed to be broadly applicable across different workplaces, the implementation plan is intentionally flexible rather than tied to one specific organization. The module is meant to function as a professional development opportunity that could be offered through Human Resources, Learning and Development, or another workplace training function depending on the organization.

The module would be delivered as a self-paced, asynchronous online experience. Since the topic focuses on competing priorities and real-world decision-making, implementation would include thinking about how the module is presented to learners and how its relevance to everyday workplace situations is communicated.

How the module is introduced to learners would matter. Because many workplaces quietly reward saying yes, being a team player, or simply taking on too much, some learners may initially see prioritization or tradeoff conversations as unrealistic or uncomfortable. For this reason, the module would ideally be positioned as a practical way to make clearer decisions and communicate expectations more effectively when work becomes messy or overloaded. It would also be helpful for organizations implementing the module to recognize the realities of employee workload and the very real risk of burnout that can result when competing priorities are left

unexamined. Organizations could offer the module in different ways depending on their needs.

For example, it could be:

- an optional professional development opportunity,
- part of onboarding for early-career employees,
- a recommended resource for employees managing projects or competing deadlines, or
- a standalone learning experience focused on workplace communication and decision-making.

Because the module relies heavily on workplace situations, some level of review before implementation would likely be helpful. Feedback could focus on whether the scenarios feel believable, whether the competing pressures feel realistic, and whether the communication examples sound like situations employees might actually encounter.

The module is designed to be completed independently through an LMS or workplace learning platform. Learners would move through scenarios at their own pace while applying ideas to situations that resemble real work challenges. Downloadable tools, including a prioritization checklist and tradeoff communication guide, would help learners carry ideas from the module into future workplace situations.

Table 2 outlines the major phases of development and implementation along with the activities and priorities associated with each stage.

Table 2
Development and Implementation Phases for “You Can’t Do It All”

Phase	General Timeframe	Tasks	Focus
Development	Prior to rollout	Build Rise content, Storyline scenarios, assessments, and downloadable tools	Create scenario-based activities and practical supports for learners.
Review and Revise	Prior to implementation	Review scenario clarity, usability, realism, and accessibility	Ensure scenarios feel believable and relevant to workplace pressures
Implementation	Initial rollout	Offer module as a self-paced professional development opportunity	Help learners connect ideas to scenarios they already experience at work
Reflection and Updates	Following implementation	Review learner feedback and identify areas for improvement	Update scenarios, examples, or supports as needed

Evaluation Plan

Because this module focuses on judgment, communication, and decision-making under pressure, evaluation needs to look beyond whether learners simply remember information. The goal is not just understanding tradeoffs in theory, but helping learners think through competing pressures more clearly when real workplace situations happen.

Kirkpatrick's Model felt like the best fit because it looks at both immediate learning and whether learners actually use these ideas later.

Table 3 below outlines what each level of the Kirkpatrick Model might look like in practice for this module and includes examples of how learning and transfer could be evaluated over time.

Table 3
Applying the Kirkpatrick Model to the Competing Pressures Module

Kirkpatrick Level	What It Looks At	Example Measures
Level 1: Reaction	Whether learners found the module relevant, realistic, and useful	End-of-module survey asking learners whether the scenarios felt realistic, whether the ideas felt useful to their work, and whether the activities helped them think differently about competing priorities
Level 2: Learning	Whether learners can apply the ideas from the module	Scenario-based assessment where learners identify competing pressures, make tradeoff decisions, and explain how they would communicate priorities to stakeholders
Level 3: Transfer/Behavior	Whether learners later use ideas from the module in real work situations	Follow-up reflection or short survey asking whether learners have used strategies from the module to prioritize work, communicate expectations, or manage competing demands differently
Level 4: Results / Impact	Whether broader workplace benefits may emerge over time	Possible indicators might include better alignment around priorities, fewer misunderstandings about expectations, or less rework caused by competing demands. However, these broader workplace outcomes would be influenced by many factors and would be difficult to attribute directly to one learning experience.

Conclusion

This design plan outlines a one-hour online learning experience intended to help professionals navigate competing priorities and workplace tradeoffs. Through scenario-based learning, structured decision-making, guided practice, and reflection, learners develop strategies for evaluating constraints, making defensible decisions, and communicating priorities effectively.

The design emphasizes application and transfer over memorization, recognizing that workplace decisions are often influenced by ambiguity, competing expectations, and limited resources. With the design decisions established, the next step will be to build the Storyline experience described throughout this plan. While the implementation and evaluation plans are hypothetical, they offer a practical framework for how the module could be introduced and evaluated in a real workplace setting.

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Acknowledgement of AI Use

I acknowledge the use of Generative AI tools (Microsoft Copilot) for brainstorming ideas, looking for sources, and suggesting edits to improve the clarity and flow of this work. However, the final content is my own original writing, and I have verified all research and information against credible sources.

Appendix A

Lesson Plan

Gagné's Events of Instruction	Theory/Reason Behind Planning for the Event	Guiding Question for Planning	Instructional Strategies
1. Gain Attention	Reception	How will you get and keep the learners' attention?	Scenario-Based Inquiry: Learners are introduced to a workplace scenario involving competing priorities, shifting expectations, and limited time. Through a Storyline interaction, learners decide how they would respond when multiple urgent demands emerge simultaneously. The activity is designed to create curiosity while highlighting the challenges of competing priorities and unclear expectations. <i>[5 minutes]</i>
2. Inform Learners of the Objectives	Expectancy	How will you inform learners of the lesson objectives?	Direct Exposition: Learning objectives are introduced through the lens of the opening scenario. Learners are shown how the module will help them analyze competing constraints, evaluate tradeoffs, and communicate decisions more effectively when workplace priorities conflict. <i>[2–3 minutes]</i>

Gagné's Events of Instruction	Theory/Reason Behind Planning for the Event	Guiding Question for Planning	Instructional Strategies
3. Stimulate Recall of Prior Learning	Retrieval	How will you remind learners of applicable prior knowledge or experiences?	Reflection Activity: Learners reflect on how they typically respond when everything suddenly feels urgent. Through a brief self-assessment, they identify common reactions such as overcommitting, reprioritizing, seeking clarification, or feeling overwhelmed. Reflection prompts encourage learners to connect prior workplace experiences to the concepts introduced in the module. <i>[3–5 minutes]</i>
4. Present the Stimulus (Content or Learning Activity)	Selective Perception	How will you teach the information or create the learning environment?	Direct Instruction + Scenario-Based Examples: Learners explore common causes of competing priorities, including limited resources, shifting expectations, ambiguity, and the tendency to overcommit. A structured decision-making process is introduced that helps learners identify constraints, evaluate tradeoffs, and determine what should be prioritized, adjusted, or deferred. Content is supported through scenario examples, visual frameworks, and worked examples connected to the opening scenario. <i>[15–20 minutes]</i>

Gagné's Events of Instruction	Theory/Reason Behind Planning for the Event	Guiding Question for Planning	Instructional Strategies
5. Provide Guidance to the Learners	Semantic Encoding	How will you provide guidance and support?	Guided Practice: Learners revisit the opening scenario and apply the decision-making process with support. Guided prompts help learners identify competing constraints, evaluate tradeoffs, and consider where communication may reduce pressure or clarify expectations. Visual supports and worked examples provide scaffolding before independent practice. <i>[10 minutes]</i>
6. Elicit Performance from the Learners	Responding (also Retrieval)	What practice opportunities will learners receive?	Scenario-Based Application: Learners work through a new workplace scenario involving competing priorities, changing expectations, and limited resources. With fewer supports, learners independently apply the decision-making process and make tradeoff decisions that influence stakeholder reactions and project outcomes. <i>[10 minutes]</i>
7. Provide Feedback to the Learners	Reinforcement	How will learners receive feedback?	Consequence-Based Feedback: Learners receive feedback through scenario outcomes, stakeholder reactions, and project consequences. Feedback focuses on tradeoffs, unintended consequences, and realistic workplace outcomes rather than identifying a single correct answer. Learners are encouraged to reflect on how different decisions influenced the situation. <i>[5–7 minutes]</i>

Gagné's Events of Instruction	Theory/Reason Behind Planning for the Event	Guiding Question for Planning	Instructional Strategies
8. Assess the Performance of the Learners	Retrieval	How will you determine whether learning occurred?	Authentic Assessment: Learners complete a final workplace scenario that requires them to identify competing constraints, evaluate tradeoffs, justify decisions, and communicate a clear response to stakeholders. Assessment focuses on the quality of reasoning and application of the decision-making process rather than selecting a single correct answer. [5–8 minutes]
9. Enhance Retention and Transfer	Generalization	How will you enhance retention and transfer?	Reflection + Job Aid: Learners reflect on a current workplace situation where they may apply ideas from the module. A downloadable prioritization checklist and Tradeoff Communication Guide are provided to support future decision-making and transfer to workplace practice. [3–5 minutes]

Note: Adapted from *The Conditions of Learning and Theory of Instruction* (4th ed.), by R. M. Gagné, 1985, Holt, Rinehart & Winston.