The "Expectations and Accountability" Tool
(Originally published as "Generating (and Receiving) Clear Expectations")

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2010, published in the Apr/May/Jun 2010 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

Everything is created twice, first mentally, then physically. The key to generating understandable expectations is to <u>think</u>, deeply examining how the outcome you desire is different from "what is".

Only if you can create a clear mental image of desired expectations can another person be successful with the physical creation. Good people fail to meet expectations usually because some important instruction was omitted or misunderstood.

This article can't help with the "misunderstood" piece, but I offer here a simple five-point model that can minimize the likelihood of critical information being overlooked!

The source of this tool is Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. (Twenty years after publication, this book continues to be a source of wonderful counsel for leaders!) The following five elements are adapted from pages 174 and 223. (Yes, this tool is so valuable for clarifying expectations that it is covered in two different chapters!)

<u>Expected Results/Desired Outcome</u>. What is to be accomplished with this effort? How does this initiative link with the organization's values, vision, mission, business plan, and goals?

Clarity of the desired outcome is perhaps the most important contribution to successful expectation-setting. When you share your desires, create an environment where the individual feels comfortable asking questions, both initially and thereafter. The clearer the expected outcomes are understood, the more likely the desired result will be achieved.

<u>Boundaries/Guidelines</u>. What are the possible limitations, boundaries, and "sacred cows" that need to be considered and not violated? There may be safety, quality, cost, legal, or procedural standards to follow. There may be some "politics" that require sensitivity.

A common mistake in delegating is to dictate the methods by which the task is to be accomplished. In some rare instances, the process may indeed be critical, but this is often just a personal preference. It is usually better to engage the individual's creativity and unique talents in executing the task as he or she chooses.

On the other hand, there are usually boundaries to be considered. For example, there may be relevant laws, or there may be guidelines established to ensure uniformity across the company. Methods attempted in the past may have failed dismally, and important insights may have been gained. These should be spelled out clearly so that the person assuming the responsibility knows what the boundaries are within which he or she is free to act.

<u>Resources</u>. How much time, money, and space can support this effort? How many people are available and where are they? What technical resources (experts, books, tools, etc.) exist?

The individual accepting the responsibility rarely knows what resources are available and how to access them. Forethought and clear communication of the availability and limitation of these resources gives the receiving person clarity, allowing focus on accomplishing the task, not guessing or scrambling.

Accountability. To whom should progress be reported? How frequently? Is there a desired format? How much detail is desired?

This expectation is often overlooked completely. Every person accepting responsibility knows that there will be an accounting of the work at some time and in some way. Known in advance, he or she can organize time and resources to meet and exceed the expectations. But we've all known the fear of having the boss ask for a status report at a time when we are not yet prepared.

Consequences. What's in it for me, for our relationship, and for others who might be affected? What's in it for our business and our customers? What damages will occur to the individuals and the organization if the project is not successful or is poorly executed?

Everyone knows there are beneficial consequences--to the individual, to the boss, to the organization--if delegated work is done well. Is there the potential for a promotion, a pay raise, advanced training, or some other worthy recognition? Maybe the reward is a consideration in the future for greater responsibility. Discussing all this openly on the front end establishes freedom and honesty that will benefit both the leader and the direct report.

Acknowledge the potential consequences of poor execution, too. Depending on the individual and the work being delegated, "does it threaten me?" may be a bigger consideration than "what's in it for me?" Everyone realizes that with responsibility comes the risk of failure, and there is usually a price paid for poor performance. Honestly acknowledging the downside, without threat, creates health in the relationship and realistic expectations from the beginning.

You can train people in your organization to use a simple one-page form with these five elements (examples are attached). I had a boss who came to me with work assignments that had not been well planned. At first, I tried to be helpful and do what I thought he wanted. But after falling short several times, I asked him to spend a few minutes jotting down his desires in these five areas.

Sure, my boss grumbled the first couple of times I did this, but I insisted that if it was worth me spending several hours, it was worth him spending just a few minutes to examine his thoughts. It wasn't long before he started coming to me and saying "Dennis, do you have one of those blank 'expectations' forms?" He had found it wasn't that tough to think through his expectations--and it significantly improved his obtaining what he wanted!

The key to successful delegation is thinking through the mental creation and communicating it completely. Then the person assuming the execution responsibility can have a clear and realistic understanding of expectations before putting effort into the physical creation.

<div align="center">

****
</div>

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach helping leaders in Atlanta, GA improve their organizational cultures, processes, and skills. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Please contact Dennis at dennsi@buildingfutureleaders.com or leave a phone message at 770-286-2250.

<u>Establishing Expectations for</u>   <u>(Project Name/Description)</u>

<u>Desired Outcomes (Expected Results)</u> What do we want to accomplish with this effort? What desired outcome do we expect from our work? What improvements will result? How will we know it? How does this effort help us meet the organization's mission, vision, values, strategic plan, and/or goals?

<u>Guidelines</u> What limitations, boundaries, or figurative "sacred cows" do we need to be aware of (and not violate)? Are there safety, quality, cost, or timing guidelines or politics we should be aware of and follow? How much freedom and autonomy do we have to act on our own?

<u>Resources</u> How much time are we allowed? How much money is there to support this effort? How many people are available and where will they come from? What space do we have to work in? What technical resources (people, books, tools) exist? What distractions (negative resources) might divert our attention?

<u>Accountability</u> Who should we keep informed as we do our work? How frequently should we inform them? What format or method do they prefer? How will we measure progress over time? What criteria would cause us to abort this project/task?

<u>Consequences</u> What's in it for me? What's in it for our relationships? What's in it for others who might be affected? What's in it for our organization? What happens to me and our organization if we do this poorly?

Establishing Expectations for   (Project Name/Description)

Desired Outcomes (Expected Results)

Guidelines

Resources

Accountability

Consequences