

# **The Importance of Setting Clear Expectations**

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We all have expectations. You have expectations for your own behaviors and for members of your team. Even if you've not set explicit expectations in the form of goals or targeted outcomes, there are underlying assumptions regarding actions to be taken and results to be achieved.

Have you ever been held responsible for obtaining some results, but you never knew for sure just what your desired outcomes were? No one consciously volunteers for such an assignment, but it seems to happen far more often than is desirable.

One of the failures of leaders when delegating responsibilities is to not make the desired outcomes explicit. Another common mistake is to not invite the individual assuming the responsibility to collaborate in defining how the behaviors and outcomes will be evaluated.

We all have experienced the emotion that occurs when an expectation is not met. "Disappointment" is the name we give to the feelings associated with the deficiency gap between the less-than-expected actual result and the anticipated outcome. The size and nature of the gap is what determines the degree of disappointment.

We also have all experienced the triumphant celebration that accompanies exceeded expectations. The favorable gap between the anticipated outcome and the better-than-expected actual result gives rise to a variety of pleasant feelings!

Depending on the degree of satisfaction, the descriptive words may range from mild (appreciation, contentment, enjoyment, gratification, etc.) to jubilant (glee, elation, bliss, delight, exhilaration, etc.).

A skilled leader recognizes that individuals who are growing and building skills need challenging expectations to stretch their existing abilities. Skilled leaders look for and offer opportunities that are just beyond the known capabilities of an individual.

We can't be guaranteed success each time we take on responsibility. We are all going to experience some disappointment in our careers; the actual result will sometimes fall short of the preferred outcome. During those times, we need support and encouragement from our leader.

Balance is one of the most difficult yet most critical characteristics of a leader. How does a leader know just how much challenge to build into a responsibility?

A quote attributed to Michelangelo is, "The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim so high that we miss it, but in setting our aim so low that we reach it." Setting your expectations low is no way to grow future leaders and to build an organization of excellence!

Yet you also don't want to set your expectations so high that the risk of repetitive disappointments is great. As human beings, we'll tend to hold back, not giving our best effort if we believe the desired outcome is not achievable.

Successful leaders help themselves and their organizations find proper balance by making expectations explicit. Further, they involve the people who do the routine work in defining the desired outcomes and the methods by which the results will be accomplished.

You as the leader need not have all the answers. Your role is to ensure that the process for setting the expectations is followed. You and the person(s) accepting the responsibility should build in from the beginning some agreeable method for routinely reporting progress.

As a take-away from this article, let me suggest that you allocate some time to talk with your team about how you currently set expectations with them. Work to identify two or three explicit changes that you will commit to make in serving them better.

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