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Great Expectations: The Key to Great Results?

by Lauren Keller Johnson

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Expecting the best from people is a strong motivator, but engaging them is even better

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IT ALL SOUNDS SO SENSIBLE: Expect the best from your employees, and they'll give you their best—a phenomenon that J. Sterling Livingston, founder of the Sterling Institute, discussed in his seminal 1969 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Pygmalion in Management." On the other hand, expect little from employees, and they'll give you meager performance in return—what INSEAD professors Jean-François Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux have named the *set-up-to-fail syndrome.*

But the interplay between managerial expectations and employee performance is more complex than these commonsense maxims suggest. To be sure, expectations exert a powerful impact on an individual's performance.

Yet managers who believe that they've done their jobs merely by defining and declaring high expectations—without involving employees in the process—will likely get the same poor results that bosses with low expectations receive.

"The idea that setting high expectations gets you more out of employees makes sense at 35,000 feet," says Janelle Barlow, president of the Las Vegas–based consulting firm TMI US. "But you have to execute this principle on the ground." Experts and executives agree that successful fulfillment of individuals' performance expectations hinges on managers' ability to apply four practices:

1. Involve employees

Just because a manager wants a certain level of performance doesn't mean an employee can provide it. So managers need to find out what employees think of proposed expectations, notes Linda Finkle, a consultant with the Potomac, Md.–based Incedo Group. Just as important, people are more committed to objectives they've helped to define and feel more confident that they can achieve them.

Bob Senatore, executive vice president of the Woodbury, N.Y.–based staffing firm Comforce, invites employee participation in setting expectations by saying, "This is what I think we can achieve together. What do you think?" He and his reporting managers negotiate defined expectations, as do these managers and their reports. Then each manager-employee pair sets benchmarks for measuring progress, particularly when the employee is new in the role. Each pair also adapts expectations when changes in the business environment demand.

Ed Gubman, founding partner of Northfield, Ill.–based Strategic Talent Solutions, urges managers to "think group, but see individuals. Big goals inspire people at the collective level, but you then need to work with each person based on their roles, strengths, and passions. You can't—and shouldn't—expect the same performance from everyone. You need to put people in situations where they can be successful."

2. Focus on achievability

No matter how actively employees participate in the expectation-definition process, they won't rise to the occasion unless they understand in concrete terms what's expected of them. Senatore says that Comforce managers express agreed-upon expectations with as much specificity as possible, including a target time frame for fulfilling each objective. They may frame expectations as, "We will sign a contract with this large account to provide them with five full-time and 10 part-time technical staff members through the first quarter of next year."

Other executives believe that too much detail can set the stage for a limited response; they maintain that clarity is still possible with less specificity. For instance, Ray Bedingfield, president of the Monument, Colo.–based executive search firm Woodmoor Group, tells recruiters who join his staff: "We expect you to be able to make six figures this year." He then leaves it up to them to decide what level of six figures to strive for.

Still, clarity of expectations isn't enough. Employees must see defined objectives as realistic and achievable. As Cary L. Cooper, professor of organizational psychology and health at England's Lancaster University Management School, says, "Expectations and performance are linked in a bell-shaped curve: High expectations can lead to improvement—until the expectations become unrealistically high. That causes overload, stress, and diminished performance. Yet many senior managers intuitively feel that they should constantly push their subordinates, setting ever-higher objectives and performance targets."

3. Build measures that help meet goals

With the right expectations in place, managers should focus next on the measures that will help people to meet them, including feedback, training, and encouragement.

Sean McLaughlin, director of development and brand performance at Philadelphia-based Aramark Harrison Lodging, had this point in mind when he launched a new feedback program in 2003. He set up a system of e-mailed surveys to gather steady, specific feedback on service quality and other criteria from hotel guests and meeting planners, the firm's two main customer groups.

The surveys, he says, provide "an enormous amount of actionable feedback that we can present to employees." If Aramark receives a response in which a guest or meeting planner has rated any performance criterion with a "1" or "2" (the lowest values on the five-point scale), the system sends an instant alert to the manager of the property in question. That manager must then communicate the situation to employees and devise a plan to address it.

McLaughlin says this approach "enables us to send two crucial messages: that we need to address alienated customers immediately and that we want to raise expectations as well as set them."

THE POWER OF SELF-EFFICACY

"Goals should be difficult," says James Smither, who teaches human resource management at La Salle University in Philadelphia, "but not so difficult that employees will see them as impossible and hence reject them."

Employees must believe they can achieve their goals if they try—a personal attribute that Smither calls *self-efficacy.* When self-efficacy is high, he says, people set more challenging goals. They also persevere when they encounter setbacks, and they respond to negative feedback with more effort rather than with defensiveness.

Smither says managers can boost employee self-efficacy by:

- Breaking up a large task and giving employees one piece of the task at a time, encouraging "small wins."
- Setting up work so that employees accomplish successively more complex and challenging tasks.
- Drawing employees' attention to colleagues who have surmounted similar challenges.
- Having an employee watch another skilled person model a desired behavior, whether it's performing a quantifiable task or exercising a harder-to-define interpersonal skill, such as conflict resolution.
- Expressing confidence in employees rather than focusing on criticism—or assuming that a person already feels confident about meeting defined expectations.

Feedback and training exert even more of an impact when managers add encouragement to the mix. As business coach Juliet Funt points out, "There's a huge chasm between a manager who says 'I want you to…' and one who says 'I know you can….' Managers must constantly notice, affirm, and express thanks for high performance."

Nevertheless, "you need to adapt the form of praise you use," says consultant Ben Leichtling. "People want their praise in different forms—whether it's delivered orally in a public forum or personally in a handwritten letter or some other form. Through observation and trial and error, managers can find out which form each person prefers."

Likewise, people respond differently to criticism. "As employees work toward fulfilling expectations," Leichtling says, "keep letting them know that you expect the best they can give. If they have trouble fulfilling expectations, adjust your approach to each person depending on how they work best. Some people respond better to shock, disappointment, and criticism; others to help with building step-by-step successes."

4. Tap into employees' deepest motivations

"People are motivated to fulfill expectations based on their personal interests—not based on what others are telling them to do," says University of Houston business professor Curt Tueffert. "Managers must work with employees to discover what each person is most motivated by—whether it's competition, a chance to form close working relationships, or some other reward. When both participate in this process, each has a higher stake in the drive for top performance."

Management consultant Robert Cannon examines motivation from a different angle: "Most managers view the world from a problem perspective and use negative language. But no one is uplifted by the statement 'We've got a problem.'" Cannon helps his clients to use the appreciative inquiry method to frame expectations in positive terms. "Through appreciative inquiry, managers and employees can define together what's going well and which assets they've got to draw from. They envision possible desired future realities, then develop and implement doable solutions for realizing those visions. Instead of telling people how to do something, managers use appreciative inquiry to explain why it's important to do it. Leave the 'how' up to employees, and you get more ownership of those expectations and more buy-in." ◆

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