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A Better Way of Setting Expectations

By Gary M. Cook

As the pace of play in organizations continues to accelerate, and as organizations continue to flatten with fewer layers of managers, setting clear expectations, ensuring that those who report to you have the tools available to meet those expectations, and giving honest but respectful feedback – as well as taking responsibility for one's own errors in expectations management – are becoming even more critical.

In this edition of the Cook & Company newsletter, we would like to focus on a method of setting expectations that we have found helps in both two-party and multi-party expectations setting. It helps create clarity, establish true team ownership, and is the crucial first step in creating an accountable organization.

Tom: "So, Lucy, why didn't you complete the monthly report by the fifth? It's now the 15th and I still don't have it!"

Lucy: "Tom, I heard you to say that the report was ideally due on the fifth, but if I didn't have time to finish it, I could finish it later. And I had to do that other thing for you, so I didn't have time."

Who should take responsibility -- Tom or Lucy -- for the report not being done on time? This is one of those classic issues in setting expectations that has bedeviled most of us at one time or another. And in some organizations it is THE most important missing factor in creating an accountable, high performing team atmosphere. It generally takes two people to set and meet expectations; it also takes at least two people to have a misunderstanding around exactly what expectations are in any given situation.

Our approach is most easily described and implemented by using the two-box expectations chart below.

(A) <u>What X Expects From Y - Substantive</u>	(B) <u>What Y Needs From X to Meet X's Expectations - Substantive</u>
Behavioral	Behavioral

Let's first take a more detailed look at Boxes (A) and (B) on the first line.

In Box (A), one typically sets expectations for a subordinate or a peer. It is all too easy for most of us as managers and leaders to write out these expectations, then hand them to our subordinate (and sometimes even to a peer) and typically ask, "What do you think?"

A more effective approach is to have a general discussion about what is required over a certain period of time (perhaps a week, month or quarter), and then to ask your opposite party to write down what they believe they have heard in terms of expectations embedded in the conversation the two of you had. If you really want to become a pro at this, you will convey by spoken and unspoken body language that this should be a true two-way conversation. Simultaneously, you can write out your own version of these expectations, and then at the next meeting compare them with those of your subordinate or peer.

Effective expectations should typically be defined in two categories: *substantive* tasks that must be performed, and *behaviors* that you find to be important in terms of your professional relationship with the opposite party.

Here is an example of what these expectations could look like:

(A) <u>What X Expects From Y (Substantively)</u>	(B) <u>What Y Needs From X to Meet X's Substantive Expectations</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a strategy to increase our market penetration from 15% to 25% within three years. • Become a thought leader by making yourself available for interviews and writing columns for industry-influencing publications. 	
<u>What X Expects From Y (Behaviorally)</u>	<u>What Y Needs From X to Meet X's Behavioral Expectations</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become more available to your peers. • Increase the judgment of your direct reports by giving them opportunities to present recommendations, instead of frequently giving them the answer. 	

Cook & Company Commentary

Now let's look at Box (B) in the upper right-hand corner, or "What your subordinate or peer needs from you in order to meet the expectations in Box (A)." This is a step that, if done at all, generally tends to be done only as an afterthought, or as the result of an offhand question at the end of the expectation setting meeting, such as, "Is there anything you need from me?"

This is insufficient. What is necessary instead is a thoughtful, two-way discussion of what your subordinate or peer believes that he or she needs in order to meet the expectations that you have just crafted together. Once again, those needs should be separated into, first, substantive requirements for emphasis (e.g., "help from the IT department"); and second, behaviors required, such as, "If you have any concerns about whether I am going to be able to deliver a work product on time, please ask me sooner rather than later." These behaviors should also include agreement that if there are differences of opinion, you will attempt to discuss them professionally and neutrally in a way that can lead to improvement, rather than interacting in an adversarial manner. Sometimes even agreeing on a code word or phrase is useful ("We've agreed that when one of us says, "Timeout," it means that both of us need to understand that what comes next is important to the relationship"). An example:

(A) <u>What X Expects From Y (Substantively)</u>	(B) <u>What Y Needs From X to Meet X's Substantive Expectations</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a strategy to increase our market penetration from 15% to 25% within three years. • Become a thought leader by making yourself available for interviews and writing columns for industry-influencing publications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To do this, I will need support from you to conduct discussions with both marketing and manufacturing VPs; we can only do this with all three units developing a joint plan. • Thought I was making progress here: would like to discuss in more detail. I will bring summary of my last year's activities.
(A) <u>What X Expects From Y (Behaviorally)</u>	(B) <u>What Y Needs From X to Meet X's Behavioral Expectations</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become more available to your peers. • Increase the judgment of your direct reports by giving them opportunities to present recommendations, instead of frequently giving them the answer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would like some examples of where this is an issue. Believe I am always available, although perhaps I do not reach out as quickly to others as some of my peers. • As we have been under severe cost and time pressures over at least the last six months, I've felt the need to be more directive. Would like to discuss with you your perspective on how to balance these two concerns.

The most common issue in expectation setting? We have found the most frequent issue we find is an unwillingness to spend the time necessary to truly set expectations carefully. This is not tough work, but the engagement that is required is sometimes beyond the leader's ability to provide. The question you must then ask is whether you are really serious about creating a high-performing organization. And remember, the ease of doing this increases exponentially (not proportionately) as you repeat the experience.

Next issue: How we can be more effective in conversations about meeting expectations once we set them.

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