

3 Practical Tips for Managing Expectations: The Most Underrated Leadership Skill

By Janine Popick

Managing expectations is a vastly underutilized skill, in my opinion. Not everyone does it, but maybe if more did, we could avoid a lot of the day-to-day drama that goes on in every office. Folks who know how to manage expectations are able to more seamlessly navigate the choppy waters of their business. Why? Because they know how to communicate, organize, and direct conversations around things getting done. Follow these three practical tips to improve your own ability to manage expectations.

Make No Assumptions

People often get into hot water when they assume a co-worker, vendor, or supervisor knows what they expect or even what they're talking about. My first piece of advice is making sure you get context. Don't fall into the trap of assuming someone has the same understanding of a situation, project, deadline, or task that you do. You can avoid this pitfall by having a conversation in which you openly discuss what's expected, how it might be accomplished, and how success will be measured. Remember to leave plenty of opportunities for questions. This is also the time to agree and commit to what will be delivered, when. When something is going to be completed is one of the most common points of miscommunication. Which leads me to my next tip...

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

One of the best ways to manage expectations is to make sure you communicate with everyone on a frequent basis. In the early stages of a new project or as a key milestone or deadline approaches, you may want to even over-communicate.

Sure, it might be more work on your part, but it's especially important if you have a new team that isn't used to working together, or new leadership that may not have developed a level of trust in the team's ability to deliver. Better safe than sorry. By holding frequent check-ins throughout the course of a project, you also have the chance to provide real-time status updates and manage any delays, risks, or blockers. When you're proactively honest and transparent in your communication, you have room to put a Plan B in place, if needed, or the flexibility of making new decisions as you move toward the finish line. Being honest about a delay is a thousand times better than promising to deliver and then missing your deadline.

Pushing Back is OK

A huge piece of managing expectations is the actual expectation, right? You have to be comfortable that the expectations are realistic and achievable. If they're not, you can-and should-push back. The key here is pushing back in a way that balances the organization's needs and the team's abilities. Being open about what can be delivered and what the plan is to bring in the rest can go a long way in instilling confidence and getting the go-ahead. If you can nail the fine art of pushback, you've won half the battle of managing expectations successfully.