Have you ever felt like pulling your hair out, saying, “Why can't they ‘get it’!” If you have, it’s likely you are frustrated because either someone or your team has disappointed you on a key result or behavior; and, more than once, you had expressed your expectation. You thought it was clear—and you thought you had shared agreement. Here’s a tip. When you don’t get what you want the failure is likely rooted in one of four causes:

1. The person or team and you thought it was clear—but, you didn’t understand it in the same way.

2. The understanding was too vague, using broad conceptual language and little observable criteria.

3. You said what you wanted, but didn’t hear or discern a lack of agreement.

4. The person or team did not have the capability or resources (including time) to deliver.

Regardless of the cause, when you are disappointed in results, your primary course of action is to seek understanding and then re-clarify and gain agreement.

**Attention!** As we talk about setting expectations, you may first consider the content as a manager would. But, you are likely to be in expectations conversations from different sides of the conversation. So, also use this approach when you have your direct report, partner, and team member “hat” on. Dig in and understand the expectations and strive for a mutual agreement in each of your roles.

**This chapter will:**

- Emphasize the importance of clear expectations—to results, relationships, and more.
- Present a process to gain:
  - Clarity on exactly what you expect.
  - Mutual understanding and agreement on a shared expectation.
- Reinforce and provide ideas for integrating what you know about the person or team with whom you are striving for clear expectations.
A DISTINCT CONVERSATION

Setting expectations is one of the three “clear conversations” in our model. It is distinct from a Feedback or Coaching conversation, yet may be utilized as part of feedback or in support of coaching.

Definition of an Expectations Conversation

A conversation that clarifies exactly what outcomes, process, behavior, etc. will satisfy the people involved.

This conversation is critical to make sure the desired results are delivered. In addition, the conversation adds value in four more ways. It:

- Creates high energy and confidence for all players (including you)
- Allows team members to self-correct because they know when they are off-track
- Facilitates fast, lower-emotional feedback and an easier way to make that feedback more meaningful
- Gives you the leverage of knowing what you don’t need to worry about getting done.

When should you set expectations? The obvious answer is at the beginning of an activity, assignment or performance period or when someone is new. The not-so-obvious answer is that expectation setting may be appropriate at any time if you are not getting what you expected.

In fact, when someone is new, a great strategy is to focus exclusively on expectation-setting conversations. Your feedback can be steeped in refining and clarifying expectations rather than judging. Your coaching is largely about providing further details about how things “work around here” while you get some good understanding of how the new person thinks. In short, your most productive conversation is getting the expectations right from the start.

If you spend more time on one type of conversation, invest that time in setting expectations!
Chapter I
Setting Clear and Mutual Expectations

SETTING EXPECTATIONS THAT CAN AND WILL BE MET

You probably have heard the phrase “is it a can-do or a will-do problem?” Unfortunately, we are quick to judge situations and people. When we are disappointed or worse, we often put our focus on the other person—Why didn’t he or she do what I wanted? Why didn’t my partner or boss explain his desired outcome better?

As you gain clarity, you can think ahead about the can-do question. You want to avoid setting and agreeing to an expectation that cannot be achieved by you, your team, or anyone else. Sometimes a fine line separates a “stretch” goal or a remarkable result” and a no-can-do goal. So, you have to make those distinctions. Ask yourself:

- Does the person (or do I) have the skills, knowledge, experience, and/or aptitude to deliver on the agreement?
- Are the necessary resources (e.g., funds, time, subject matter experts, etc.) available or attainable?
- Is the required support secured or attainable from senior management, co-creators, collaborators, etc.?

The lesson is obvious: don’t set expectations that cannot be met. Solving for the can-do also allows you to determine whether a person’s attitude is the problem.

“Will-do” can be harder to discern because the mental willingness to accomplish the goal resides in the thought system of the person. Even when challenged on a lack of willingness, few people will admit it.

So, do you ignore it? Perhaps, especially the first time someone doesn’t deliver as expected. Yet, if you continue to question whether the will is there, explore the matter by providing feedback with facts through pictures: Ask, “What’s missing? Do you really want to deliver?” Few people truly want to disappoint.

If you have nailed the can-do question, then move to the willingness. If you have someone unwilling to deliver, you can either change or modify the agreement or change the person.
IS CLARITY POSSIBLE?

In our work on getting really clear, we assert that full clarity is sometimes nearly impossible. In fact, the clearer one gets, the more frustrating it is to see the “gray” remaining. Some of that gray is due to our lack of thought about what we really want; an inability to break down the different aspects to the result. But, much of the gray is due to the nature of language. We use words that may signal different meanings to different people. Each bullet point on a slide may need to be clarified by asking, “What do we really mean by this word.” The ultimate goal is to describe our desired outcome in a picture that each person sees the same way.

Think about the simplest of requests: “Bring me a glass of water.” There’s a world of different meanings in a seemingly simple phrase:

- What temperature (e.g., cold, hot, boiling, room, etc.)
- Ice or no ice?
- Tap, bottled, sparkling or flat?
- Now or later—when?

Sound complicated? Well, water actually isn’t so simple these days. If the person making this request had something specific in mind (e.g., Perrier with three ice cubes in a crystal goblet), he or she could be very disappointed with what gets delivered. More importantly, aren’t your results, behaviors, and relationships a lot more complicated than a glass of water?

Full clarity is often not possible, but the outcome of seeking clarity makes the effort worthwhile. The following personal story demonstrates the complexity.

A PERSONAL STORY

My former boss was bright, demanding and articulate. When I began to work for him, we would meet and talk about an analysis that I needed to complete. He would dictate rather than speak. I would ask questions, and leave the meeting with what I thought was clear understanding of my task. Yet, once inside my office I’d discover that I had no idea what I really was supposed to do.
Reluctant to ask for more clarification, I would do what I thought was needed and submit it for his review. In truth, fear spurred my reluctance to return to his office and simply say, “Can you repeat yourself to me?” He was an important guy in the company…and after all, he believed he had been clear. In the end, I would produce the wrong analysis and he would be disappointed and sometimes critical, responding, “This isn’t what I needed or the answer we were trying to get to.” I would then anxiously ask some questions to which he would rattle off directions about what needed to be done. Once again, I would return to my office thinking that I knew exactly what needed to be done, and I discover that I did not know at all.

It wasn’t until we had been through a series of small projects that I realized he actually didn’t know what he wanted at the start of our conversations. It was only after he started looking at the data that he began to get some true direction and formulate a response.

Often we set the expectations for someone—our boss, our partner, our client—before we even know what we want. And, often it’s not possible to be clear at the start because exploration is necessary first. When this learning dawned with my former boss, I began to say, “Let’s talk about where we think we’re going with this analysis and what the next step is…so that we can figure out the endpoint as we work the data.” We learned to work the expectations as the project unfolded.

**THE PROCESS**

While perfection is not likely, there are ways to improve the quality of expectation-setting. Start by determining the *type* of expectations and *whose* expectation.

*What type of expectation?* Identifying whether the expectation is a simple result or one that includes a critical process, can be key to getting all the aspects clarified. The type of expectation can dictate what and how you gain clarity and agreement, for example:

- A behavioral expectation may best be demonstrated or confirmed with stories that illustrate or show what the expected behavior “looks like.”.
- Career expectations are mostly “owned” by the person with the career.
Who owns the expectation? This question is meaningful for two reasons. First, the position or personal power of the individual or team who owns the expectation informs the importance of getting the expectation clear. Whether we like it or not, when the Board, the CEO, the client, or your boss has an expectation of you, you should pay particular attention to clarity and mutual agreement. That doesn’t mean you should accept what is requested without question; it means you should be clear about the importance.

Second, the recognized expertise of the person may inform how you clarify and agree on an expectation. For example, in complex situations if the person setting the standard for the process has completed many like projects successfully or is “known” in the company as the resident expert, focus on understanding the expectation rather than on mutual agreement.

Once you have the context for what expectation and by whom, you can work through three broad steps in the process:

**STEP #1 - Articulate Your Expectation**

Start by capturing your clearest way of stating your expectation. What outcome do you want? What behavior or process is critical? Just get it down on paper. For example, you might say, “Project delivered on time and within budget.”

Or, you might say, “Stakeholder management and shared accountability” is critical. Each of those statements is a starting point, but can you get any clearer? Is it all about time and budget, or is it quality—and how does that impact the first two? What time? What does “within budget” really mean? What do you mean by stakeholder management and “shared” accountability? Peel-the-onion as much as you can to reflect the level of clarity you currently have—what you know about what you want.

**STEP #2 - Gather More Information and Get Really Clear**

Often an expanded set of data informs what you want. So, on a large piece of paper, lay out what you know, what you assume, and what you don’t know about what is happening that could inform your expectations.
For example, as you think about the need for stakeholder management, you may reflect on a recent situation in which a senior manager “landed” on the team—what could they have done differently? Or, in terms of on-time delivery, how would the lack of a contingency plan modify your expectation?

Use the facts at hand to advance the clarity of your expectation. Then drive for even greater clarity. Use the process for “getting really clear” to peel-the-onion on each aspect of your desired outcome.

### STEP #3 - Gain Mutual Understanding and Agreement

Once you have clarity, it’s time to gain mutual understanding. Even if others were involved articulating the expectation and/or getting clear (steps 1 and 2), you must establish mutual understanding and gain agreement.

Mutual understanding sounds a bit like this:

> “Let’s confirm what we’re talking about… Is that it?...No? What about this?...Closer, give me your version of the outcome?...Yes, that’s it.”

Or, some variation of:

> “No, that’s not it” or “Not quite” or “One aspect you haven’t covered is…”

Work the dialogue until you have an agreement that strikes an unequivocal “Yes, that’s it!” Unfortunately, there is no formula or any perfection in the process. In addition, you must pay attention to the degree of clarity and commitment in the conversation. The following personal story shares a parent-child example.

### A PERSONAL STORY

My son is a true freedom seeker. So, getting him to set mutual expectations about when he will show up at our doorstep during the evening is a challenge. Over time, we have developed a process that works like this: rather than battle over compliance, we take a minute to talk about the plan for the evening. We discuss what he wants and what I want, and try to find a mutual solution.
In the past, he often exited the garage door casually promising to “be home by 10:00,” to which I would respond, “You better be.” When the clock struck 10 and he was not home, I called his cell phone. Often, I found him at a neighbor’s watching a movie that ended at 11. Then the conversation became stern parent vs. defensive child.

Fortunately, we’ve made true progress. Now, we proactively talk about what we can mutually agree on. When I have my wits about me, I stop and ask my son what is really going on for him and let him know whether there is a hard curfew or whether 10:05 is OK but 10:15 is not. We also agree on whether he can call from a neighbor’s house and request a later curfew. It’s not a negotiation because I have the power as a parent (power of expectation anyway). Yet it works because we both know and understand the expectations and the acceptable and unacceptable behavior in response. I see a lesson in this story for business situations: Too often, we quickly state our expectations, but neglect to engage in true dialogue with the other person.

...AND PEOPLE ARE FUNNY ~ THINK ABOUT THE PERSON

So far, we’ve made this all about the facts and concrete statements of expectation. Yet we know people are different…and therefore funny. In fact, to be most successful, you have to think about the person or team (made up of multiple individuals) and question:

- What expectation has been set to-date?
- When was the last conversation on expectations?
- What do you know about this person(s):
  - Behavior patterns?
  - Way of thinking?
  - Concerns?
  - Interests?
  - Motivations?

And, how do you use what you know to help: 1) communicate the expectations, 2) collaborate, and 3) set the expectations that will motivate the individual or team? Ultimately, how can you engage this person to get the best from him or her?
The following personal story shows a proactive expectation-setting. What does this associate know about funny partners?

A PERSONAL STORY

This is an interesting coaching scenario. When I was the head of HR in a consulting firm, we hired associates and expected them to negotiate their work assignments and keep their commitments. They had to keep their plates full and meet both partner and client expectations. On one occasion, a new associate came to me greatly distressed because he was being pressured by a prominent partner to take on a new assignment. The partner had told him, “You’re the one I want to work with.” The project was a fabulous opportunity, but the associate was already fully committed to other projects and believed that taking on this new assignment could jeopardize all of his projects. He had tried to explain this to the partner who responded, “You’ll figure it out...you’re sharp enough...we'll make sure you get help.”

Frustrated, and fearful, he came to me for coaching. I advised him to first get clear about the partner’s exact needs, and then fully explain all of his commitments and ask the partner to assess whether they all were doable. The associate did exactly that. He got the details of the new assignment from the partner. Then, he diagramed the timelines and milestones of his current and the new project. He shared the diagram with the partner and asked him to “confirm that all these deliverables could be met.” The partner took one look at the picture and saw that the associate could not deliver on the project. The facts were clear. The associate’s dilemma was resolved.

Try This!

Practice a conversation with your son, daughter, spouse, parent or significant other.

1. Identify an area of discord or lack of delivery (not an insignificant issue).
2. Think through what you observe and then back into what you expect.
3. Get really clear about what you expect, so clear that your person could “see” it through your description.
4. Ask for a conversation to develop a shared expectation on the issue. Be curious and open about the other person’s thinking and interest.
5. Confirm any agreement with dialogue (let’s talk about what we just decided), not stopping at a quick “yes” or nod. Then, let me know about the outcome of your approach.