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What to Do When Expectations Aren't Met

Nancy Radford

Abstract: What should you do when expectations aren't met? Life rarely turns out as we expect. New managers and supervisors are usually taught the disciplinary procedures to use when expectations are not met, but rarely taught how to manage the emotions and the people while implementing them. In this article, we will look at why unmet expectations can trigger negative emotions and unhelpful behavior. I highlight the attitudes and soft skills that are crucial for effective interventions and behavior change. I also provide tips on how to set clear standards and avoid misunderstandings.

Key words: broken promises, discipline, setting expectations, trust, Unmet expectations, when expectations are not met

Nancy Radford is a specialist in early conflict resolution, accredited as a civil and commercial mediator, and qualified as a trainer, business coach, and personal coach. Her varied career includes nursing, midwifery, business ownership, management, and training. All her roles involve helping others make life easier for themselves. She works with family businesses, schools, and third sector organizations, resolving conflict through training, coaching, and mediation.

Introduction

Life rarely turns out as we expect. If it is better than expected, few people have a problem adjusting to it. What we usually need help with at work is when our expectations of people's behavior aren't met, and it impacts negatively on us. When life or people disappoint you, how you react is crucial. Persistence in dealing with disappointment and learning from bad experiences is a common thread in lives of great leaders. James Whitcomb Riley sums this up as follows:

> The most essential factor is persistence—the determination never to allow your energy or enthusiasm to be dampened by the discouragement that must inevitably come.

Some would say that whenever an employee does not meet expectations, disciplinary procedures should be followed. While managers should be aware of these procedures, resorting to them without considering other

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options is limiting. To grow as a leader, you need the skills to assess, evaluate, and decide what works in different situations.

In this article, I cover why unmet expectations are so unsettling, giving some common examples that you may come across. We examine the underlying issues and potential outcomes. In addition to highlighting the soft skills and attitudes that will help you handle these situations well, I show you how to use them as springboards to improvement by setting clear standards and maintaining them.

Understanding Our Reactions

Flight or Fight

To understand why we build expectations and why we react so strongly when they are not met, we need to know how our brains react to change. Evolution has hardwired us with a protective response called the flight or fight response. When the flight or fight response takes over, the thinking brain is switched off and the primitive instincts take over. Civilized thoughts and emotions are replaced by anger, fear, maternal instinct, and a focus on self-survival. This results in behaviors that are often totally inappropriate for modern work and social environments. Learning to control this response is critical to being successful in business today. My article, *Handling Emotions in Conflict: Controlling Your Inner Caveman* (Radford, 2017), explains this in a greater detail. The flight or fight response is triggered not only by physical threats, but also by emotional and social ones. Our perception of events is more important than reality.

Human Motivation

Survival is the driver which turns us into cavemen, combined with a fear that our needs will not be met. Maslow (Maslow, 1943) proposed a hierarchy of needs that motivated all humans. It illustrates his now widely accepted views on the order in which humans prioritize their needs. Figure 1 simplifies and summarizes these needs. As you can see, security comes just after physical needs. Until we feel safe, it is difficult to be fulfilled and happy.

There is a very strong urge to create security; therefore, we plan for the future—and to do this, we need to have an image of the future we want. This is the root of expectations.

When expectations aren't met, we feel unsafe. It reduces our trust in the future and the likelihood of our needs being met.

Further understanding can be gained from the "Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness (SCARF) Model of Motivation, developed by David Rock (Rock, Your Brain at Work, 2009) showing social threats to which we react strongly. Rock's research found that even when

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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Figure 2: SCARF Model of Human Motivation

Type	Description	Threat
Status	Importance in relation to others	Perception of a potential or real reduction in social standing in group
Certainty	Ability to predict the future	Predicting the near future helps keep us save. Uncertainty generates stress.
Autonomy	Perception of exerting control over one's environment	When only one option, more stress.
Relatedness	Sense of belonging	Feeling alone or among enemies triggers fear.
Fairness	Transparency Results reflect actions.	Unfairness generates anger. Lack of transparency erodes trust.

physical and safety needs seem to be met, people react strongly in five key areas. These motivators SCARF can be negative or positive. Figure 2 gives more detail on each of the factors and potential threats.

Understanding the SCARF Model provides not only insight into your own emotional reaction, but also clues on how to motivate others to meet their expectations. When expectations are not met, some or all of these factors are in play. If someone doesn't give sufficient weight to what we want or expect from them, it makes us feel less important, threatening our status. By not fulfilling our plans, it threatens our certainty. If what happens is not what we planned, it reduces our sense of autonomy. The disappointment may affect relationships and create divisions. If expectations are not met, it seems unfair, especially if we believe that we have played our part.

Being aware of our emotions and the reasons behind them helps us in managing our emotions, a crucial skill in managing others. Spend some time studying your own emotions and the thoughts that lie behind them. Think about the stories you tell yourself about the behavior of others.

Before You Act

Before you are faced with an unmet expectation, a broken promise, or a betrayal of trust, it is worth looking at some of the issues involved. Preparing yourself will help you manage situations in a professional way. So, what do you need to think about?

Should I Take Action?

The first decision to make is whether to take action. First, you need to clarify what the issue is. Work through the example below.

Beaver Brothers Exercise

Beaver Brothers Service Engineers are proud of their reputation for "Prompt, polite and personal service." You work for them as a manager and expect staff to arrive 5 minutes before 9 so they start work at 9. On Monday, Fred, a member of your team, arrives 15 minutes late.

What do you do?

When might you want to discipline Fred?
When might you thank Fred for turning up 15 minutes after his starting time?

See Additional Information for Exercises for real-life examples which that might influence your response.

You need more information than is shown above to make an appropriate response, and in most cases, you would have more. Now go to *9. Supplementary Information.*

What Information Do I Need?

The data you need to take into consideration are listed below:

- What else is happening at the same time? (For example, anything else the person is doing/saying, the way others are behaving, or the situation.)
- Possible reasons for the behavior such as external factors that provide a logical explanation for the person's actions.
- Past experience such as previous transgressions or good character may inform your understanding.
- Cultural differences, personal traits, and common expectations. Ask is it just me?

Some of this information may not be relevant, and some may not be available. Sometimes, a decision has to be made without any additional information.

In this case, consider the consequences of not taking action immediately and the risks of taking action. In some cases, the consequences of not taking action are so great that you need to speak out. For example, if someone is crossing a railway line when a train is speeding toward him, the consequences of waiting for more information are high. In the case of someone being late for work, waiting until you have more information may not have any negative consequences.

How Do I Choose Whether to Speak Up or Not?

When it is clearly a breach of trust, a broken promise, or a blatant disregard of rules, the decision is easy. Other times things are not so clear, and we aren't sure what to do. We often know deep inside ourselves what we should do, but we ignore this wisdom. In Crucial Confrontations (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, Crucial Confrontations, 2005), the authors found that people's behavior often gave a clear indication of when they should speak up about an issue.

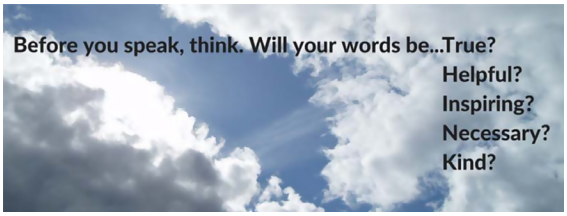
Table 1 summarizes the symptoms and provides examples.

Table 1 When to Speak Up

Symptom	Examples
Acting it out instead	Sarcasm, cold shoulder, dropping hints, and damaged relationship
Conscience nagging	Continually thinking you should do something, feeling bad if you don't.
Stressing the difficulties of speaking up	Downplaying the risks of not saying anything, exaggerating difficulties/risks of speaking up
Victim role	Telling yourself you are helpless.

Look at your own behavior and thoughts. Are you continually making excuses to yourself about why you aren't speaking up? Are you acting out your anger?

Before speaking up, examine your motives. Are you just doing it to show you are superior? Do you have all the facts? What would be the best result?



Simply deciding to speak up is not enough. As well as *if* you should speak, you also need to think about *what* the issue is, when to address it, and how to handle the conversation.

What Is the Issue?

In the Beaver Brothers exercise, the issue may seem clear—it is the fact that Fred was late. Yet as we think about the different causes and circumstances around the

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event, we realize that there are three possible topics for discussion. In *Crucial Confrontations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, Crucial Confrontations, 2005), these are called *content*, *pattern*, and *relationship*.

Perfect Printers-1

John was a young apprentice at Perfect Printers. Mark, the printer, had recommended him to the firm. On Monday, Mark showed John how to clean the press and told him it was his job to do it at the end of every shift. On Tuesday, Mark discovered that the press had not been properly cleaned. This was the first time this had happened.

In this case, the discussion would be about *content*: what happened, the consequences, and what was expected.

Perfect Printers-2

After Mark talked to John about the problem, John said that he would do better next time. On Wednesday, Mark was away, and on Thursday, he noticed that the press was not clean. He was told that John had not cleaned the press while he was away. Mark told John that he needed to do it every day. Thursday John cleaned the press when Mark reminded him. The next week John only cleaned the press when told.

Now it is not just about cleaning the press, it is about a *pattern* that is emerging. The problem is not the cleaning process; it is that John is repeating his mistake and not taking responsibility. As John knows that he should clean the press, now Mark needs to focus on the pattern expected as well as the task.

Perfect Printers-3

Mark called John in and clarified that he expected John to clean the press at the end of the shift every day. John should do this without being told. However, John said that he thought the press looked clean enough and didn't see why he should clean it. Mark explained why it needed to be done even if it looked clean. However, John still did not clean the press. Mark began to feel that John did not respect Mark's position and was taking advantage of the fact that they were friends. Mark was worried about how John's behavior reflected on him as a manager and his relationship with his boss.

It's escalated now into a wider problem involving *relationships*.

What do you think would have happened if Mark did not say anything until John had repeated his mistake? At Stage 3, what should Mark concentrate on when he talks to John—the cleaning or the implications for the relationship?

Be sure that you are addressing the real issue.

Your Part

Think about what you did or didn't do that might have caused the problem. Were you clear about what you wanted? Did you provide the appropriate resources or training the person needed? Did you outline the consequences and priorities? Did you check understanding?

Timing

Generally, the sooner you raise an issue, the easier it is to solve. Most disciplinary procedures are based on timely intervention and proportionate response. Be sure you have enough information. You need to choose an appropriate time and place to speak with the person about the incident. Be clear in your own mind what you want to achieve with the conversation. There are

three key things to have clear in your mind before having the conversation: what you want the person to know, what you want them to feel, and what you want them to do. Here's a tool to help you remember what to consider before you act.

CATCH Yourself before You Start Tool

C. **C**larify in your own mind what the problem is. When did it start, what exactly is happening, and what are the results? Try and see it from all angles.

A. **A**ccept responsibility for what you might have done—did you explain yourself clearly?

T. **T**ake control of your emotions. Be curious, not furious. If you are angry, you will not think straight.

C. **C**hoose a time and place.

H. **H**ope for a good outcome—think of the best possible result from your discussion. How can you make sure that happens?

The Conversation

Once you have clarified the issue, picked the time and place, and identified the desired outcome, you are ready to start. Keep focused on the solution, not the problem. A collaborative approach is much more likely to result in a long-lasting solution. Waiting for the perfect moment may seem tempting, but the longer you leave it, the more ingrained the situation will become.

Models

Nonviolent Communication

The Nonviolent Communication Process, developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 2015), consists of two parts and four components. The two parts are empathy and honesty. Having empathy with others and expressing oneself honestly at the same time can be difficult; however, it is possible if one can avoid blame and demand. The four components of the process which facilitate this are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Components of Nonviolent Communication

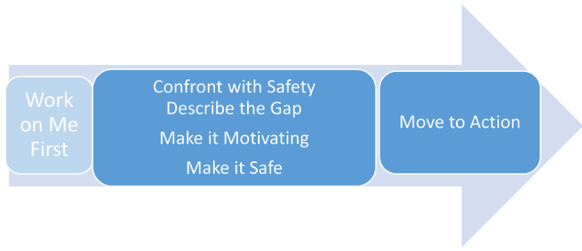
Components of Nonviolent Communication Process (Center for NonViolent Communication, 2008)	
Observations	Objective, no blame, no evaluation
Feelings	Not thoughts, but emotions or sensations
Needs	Needs or values (rather than preferences) that cause feelings when they are met/not met
Requests	Clearly requesting something that would enrich my life without demanding

Crucial Accountability

Patterson and his team of researchers studied people who managed accountability conversations well and found that they followed a pattern. (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2013). The team worked out the steps and created an effective model for others to learn. Their findings (Work on Me First) informed the suggestions in *Before You Act*.

Figure 3 shows the stages.

Figure 3. Crucial Confrontations Model



Collaborative and Proactive Solutions

Ross Greene developed a model of problem-solving, initially for parents who were struggling with difficult behavior of their children (Greene, 2017); however, this model works equally well for adults. Figure 4 illustrates Greene's model.

Using any of these models can help us respond appropriately when we are talking

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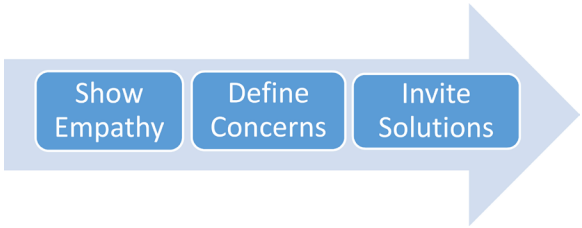
Figure 4. Collaborative and Proactive Solutions Plan B



to others about failing to meet expectations. Further reading is recommended, particularly *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Rosenberg, 2015) and *Crucial Accountability* (Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler, 2013). I have summarized the important steps below, giving examples.

1. Be clear about the desired outcome and what's in it for them. "I'd like us to be able to work together well to get this project done."
2. Ask permission/show respect. If they say no, ask when would be a good time and place. "There's something that's been bothering me and I wonder if I could speak with you about it."
3. Don't blame, be objective, and talk about your part in the process. "I know we haven't much time at the meetings and I do sometimes talk a lot. When you interrupt me to speed things up, I get very embarrassed about it and feel hurt."
4. Listen to their side of the story and ask for a solution. "So what do you think we could do to make this better for all of us?"
5. If this doesn't bring up some answers, offer what you could do and request assistance. "I'll try and be briefer. Next time you think I am going on too much, please would you make a gesture or catch my eye instead of interrupting?"

It often helps to have something to remind us of these steps, especially when we are stressed. Initially it may feel awkward, but more you practice, the more natural and effective it will become. The tool below may be useful, and once mastered, simply thinking STAR or seeing a star will remind you.

Be a STAR

S. **S**tate what the purpose of the conversation is.
Start with something you agree on.
Show what's in it for them.
Safety is important. Don't threaten or blame.

T. **T**ake control of your emotions. Be curious, not furious. If you are angry, you will not think straight.
Tell what you have seen as objectively as possible and how you feel.
Talk tentatively—don't judge.

A. **A**dmit your part, apologizing if necessary.
Ask for their view of the situation and what they think would solve the issue.
Appreciate they may see things differently.

R. **R**esolve: If the solution they suggest is not acceptable, go back to the beginning.
Record the decision: This may not be a formal document; it could be an e-mail confirming what you decide. This checks whether everyone is on the same page, and if the problem recurs, it provides information.

Obstacles to Success

Organizational Culture

Some time ago, I was asked to help a very traditional factory to go through a period of internal reorganization and external market changes. The firm prided themselves on the high standard of their goods, which was internationally recognized. A culture of excellence was the norm, so little praise was given. There was a wooden spoon award for the stupidest thing someone had done, but nothing for people who had produced excellent work. The chairman said "We expect them to produce wonderful things, and they know that it is appreciated. So we don't need to praise." When something went wrong, the first question was "Whose fault is it?" It took me 3 years, but by the time I left, the negative

awards had been done away with, positive reinforcement was the norm, and the first question was "How can we put it right?" Not only was it a happier place to work, but also the productivity and sales increased.

A culture of blame means mistakes are covered up, people are frightened to innovate, and they spend more time in criticizing others than in improving their own work.

Social/Cultural Conditioning

Many people believe that conflict should be avoided at all costs and so do not raise issues of accountability. However, if the issue is important, emotions will leak out, explode, or result in resignations. Creating a model for people to follow, providing training, and making it safe for people to voice their concerns will help to overcome reluctance to address sensitive issues of accountability. An excellent resource with case studies is *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, Influencer: The Power to Change Anything, 2008).

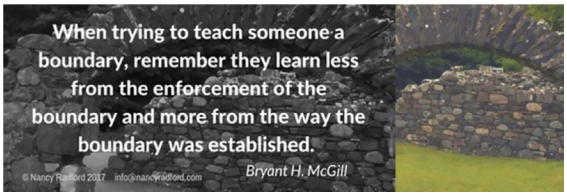
Useful Skills and Tools

Emotional Control

Working through the points above will help you approach the situation in a more rational and calm way that will increase your chances of success. If you have difficulty with this, invest in training and practice. Using small negative events to practice emotional control means that when a crisis arises, you are ready for it.

Setting Clear Expectations

If you want your expectations to be met, you need to clearly set them and ensure that people understand. Involvement in the process of creating targets increases the motivation to reach them. Explain the priorities, and give examples. You may need to explain why you expect people to behave in a certain way. Ask for feedback. Check understanding, and don't assume that silence means consent. Be sure that the consequences of not meeting expectations are clear. This should not be a threat, but a matter of fact consequence.



Motivating People

In *Human Motivation* we learned about what people need and move toward. Using fear and coercion as motivators is not an effective long-term strategy. It only works with constant supervision. Productivity suffers, as when people feel threatened, the fight or flight response kicks in, and thinking stops. Instead, use the positive side of the SCARF model. Think of ways of motivating people by enhancing their status, making them feel safer or more connected. Would you be able to give them more choices in the way they fulfill your expectations? Can you explain your expectations so that they seem fair?

Notice what goes right as much as what goes wrong . . . master the art of praise and you'll increase motivation.

MASTER Praise Tool

- **M. M**eaningful and specific: Praise for effort as well as ability, for example, "You worked very hard to get those pallets done in time."
- **A. A**ppropriate: Done too much it becomes meaningless, not enough people get discouraged.
- **S. S**incere: People can tell if you really mean it or not. Find something you genuinely want to praise.
- **T. T**imely: As close to the time as possible so they link the good feeling with the act and do it again.
- **E. E**nabling: Not just as a S#!T sandwich or sugar coating, but as an encouragement to keep on going.
- **R. R**ecord: Be sure to make a note, so that the good as well as the bad goes on record.

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Consistency and Transparency

Rules should apply to everyone and should be clear, consistent, and appropriate. If they aren't, they will become a source of conflict and unenforceable. People may not like rules or the expectations set, but if they are seen as fair, achievable, and reasonable, it will be easier to implement them.

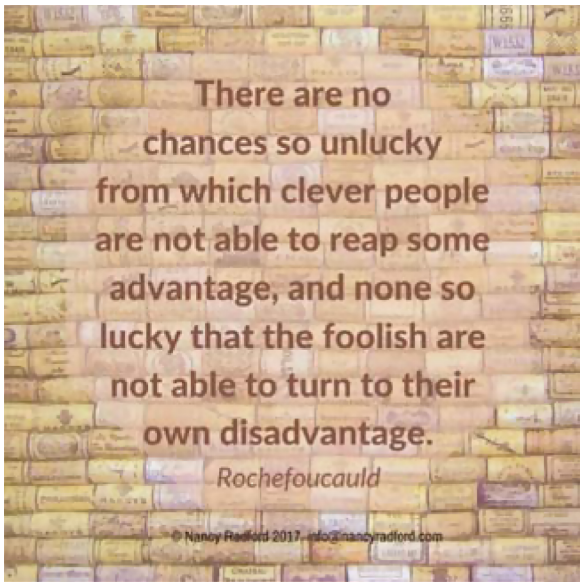
Follow-Up

If expectations aren't met, discipline isn't enough. While blame is not helpful, discovering the cause of the problem can help prevent a recurrence. The first question should be "How can we put it right?" and the second "What can we do to avoid the problem in the future?" If there is nothing you can do to avoid the problem, think of how you can mitigate the effects. Look at your own behavior—is there anything that you would like to do differently next time? What have you learned?

Conclusion

We have looked as several models of managing unmet expectations based on the research. The success and failure of businesses are not so much a matter of luck, but on how people respond to what happens.

To discover what works best in your own situation, act like a scientist. Observe what you are doing, try and understand the situation, step back, and be objective. Try different ideas, and ask for help. Make a note of what worked and what didn't. Keep trying.



Supplementary Information

Beaver Brothers Additional Information

What if

- Fred phoned ahead to let you know his bus had broken down so he would be at least 20 minutes late.
- You saw Fred outside smoking and reading his article for 15 minutes before he came into work.
- You had already warned Fred about coming in late.
- There was a blizzard, and no one else had turned up for work yet.
- A colleague said that Fred's wife had been taken into hospital in labor at 5 am.
- Fred knew his presence was critical to a project, and his colleagues said that he had been out drinking the night before.
- Fred apologized as he came in and offered to stay late to make up for it.
- Fred didn't give any reason for his lateness and seemed reluctant to start work.
- The MD had told all the staff they could come in half an hour later as they had all stayed late the previous Friday to finish a critical job.

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