

## *Positive Leadership in Project Management*<sup>1</sup>

### **The Art of Managing Expectations**<sup>2</sup>

**By Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow**

A managerial and leadership skill area or capability that seems to require some attention is the ability to clearly establish expectations with people who have been given work assignments. I have spoken to hundreds of project managers and managers of project managers about the setting of expectations and have found that this particular part of the leader and manager role is either ignored or given very superficial attention. Leaders know that a positive, motivational, and inspiring attitude is essential for personal success, the success of the team, and the successful implementation of a project. Leadership is about creating change, taking risks, setting an example, and having the courage to keep trying when previous attempts did not work. Effective leaders also know that setting expectations very specifically and intentionally will assist in achieving organizational goal and/ or project objectives. Leadership is about clearly defining a direction, communicating that direction to teams and individuals, filling people with a sense of confidence during difficult times, taking the edge off in times of great stress, and providing followers with a sense of purpose and a belief that they can succeed in reaching their goals. Success also depends on the setting of goals, objectives, and expectations.

Leadership begins with a vision, a desired future state, and commitment to achieve that vision. Achieving the vision requires a set of clear expectations for the team as a whole and for each individual team member. Unfortunately, in many cases, expectations are set in a very informal and sometimes, negative manner. When a new leader is assigned to a team or organization, it is very common for some dialog to be initiated among several employee and managerial levels about the incoming leader and what to expect regarding leadership capability, style, experience, and working relationships. Much of this dialog is based on hearsay, rumors and unsubstantiated information. Assumptions are formed, judgments are made and plans for dealing with the new leader are often created in advance of any actual activity or contact with the new leader. These assumptions may lead to an uncomfortable environment for communication and could cause some serious issues in the areas of working relationships, morale and productivity. Alternatively, the newly assigned leader, upon some observation of the organization he or she is joining, may begin to make assumptions and prematurely set some expectations regarding

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<sup>1</sup>This article is one in a series on Positive Leadership in Project Management by Frank Saladis, PMP, PMI Fellow, popular speaker and author of books on leadership in project management published by Wiley and IIL in the United States. Frank is widely known as the originator of the International Project Management Day, the annual celebrations and educational events conducted each November by PMI members, chapters and organizations around the world. Learn more in his profile at the end of this article.

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organizational or specific individual performance without actually gathering information about behaviors and performance or conducting any formal discussions with other leaders or employees. This lack of dialog, open communication and setting of “spontaneous expectations” may lead to a serious breakdown in many performance areas and create conflict that could lead to some serious organizational disruption.

Truly effective leaders understand that setting expectations intentionally is one of the key factors associated with organizational success. By intentionally, I mean the leader schedules a specific session to discuss issues, concerns, visions, ideas, and ultimately expectations with an individual, a team, or representatives from business entities.

It is important to understand that expectations are different from goals and objectives.

Goals relate to vision, aspirations, and a desired state. Organizations establish goals such as becoming the consumer’s number one choice for products and services, becoming the leading distributor of a certain set of products, the leader in product quality.

Objectives are stepping stones to achieving goals.

Most project managers and executives are familiar with the term “SMART” objectives:

**Specific** – clearly stated, detailed, focused

**Measurable** – can be tracked and measured as in quantity, numerical data or comparative analysis

**Achievable** – Feasible and actionable. Can be accomplished by the person or team assigned

**Realistic** – Are meaningful and are not beyond the capabilities of the individual or team and will produce a useful or value adding result

**Time based** – will be accomplished within a reasonable and agreed upon date.

Objectives answer the What? Who? When? Why? How? And Where? Questions. We need objectives to set direction and to make sure employees and teams know what they must accomplish.

Expectations are associated with objectives but are somewhat different. Expectations are more like agreements between people regarding how to proceed with an assignment, how reviews will be conducted during the execution of an assignment, how communication will be managed, the level of quality, timeliness, reliability, and how changes will be managed. As an example, a leader or manager may set the following expectation: “During this assignment I expect you to contact me immediately following a report of any safety violation” or “I expect you to keep me informed of major changes the customer may request.” Expectations are set in many ways. They can be communicated and established by what is said or not said, what someone else may have said, or an

action or inaction. It is important to ask the following questions to better understand when a problem situation has occurred and appears to be based on someone's understanding or misunderstanding of an expectation:

Why did the individual assume that there was an expectation to perform the activity? How was this expectation set? Who set it? When was it set? What can be done to correct the situation and prevent it from reoccurring?

These may be good questions, but they are somewhat reactive. It is generally more effective to think from a more proactive and preventive mindset and ask yourself the following questions:

- What am I expecting from the team or the individual?
- What do I know about the team or the individual?
- What is important to me regarding the assigned work or project? How important is timeliness? How important is format? How important is quality and ascetics?
- How well does the assigned individual know the process?
- How familiar is the individual with organizational polices?
- What is expected of me?
- How can I make sure that my expectations are clearly stated and understood?
- What is required to develop and deliver a clear expectation?
- What does the individual need to ensure a successful assignment?

When you have sufficiently answered these questions, you will then be prepared to have a meaningful expectation setting session with individuals and teams.

The next time you have a conversation with a colleague about a dissatisfied client or manager or other business associate, you may hear someone say "we failed to meet their expectations." Think about that statement. There is probably quite a bit of truth in those 6 words. In these situations, the reason for the problem is the failure to set expectations up front.

If we use a familiar technique known as root cause analysis, we are able to observe that many problems are created due to a lack of clearly defined and explained expectations. A root-cause analysis requires a strong and specific problem statement, the foundation of the process. Many leaders struggle with the development of a well- defined problem statement and it does require some degree of effort to develop, but it is essential for the process to work effectively. When a problem statement has been developed, the analysis may focus on four common categories:

- People
- Equipment and machines
- Methods
- Materials

This process will lead to the identification of specific areas where action is necessary and where expectations may be established.

Think about a situation in which your expectations were not fully met. Then ask yourself how you know the expectation was not met. What were you expecting? Did you communicate that expectation to the appropriate people? Can you clearly articulate your expectations? After some initial analysis you can probably generate a problem statement that specifically states or describes a situation that occurred and is related to the failure to meet expectations. For example: Performance in the quality metric for the product has consistently not reached the desired level. Then ask “What performance is in question? In the people category of the analysis, is it timeliness, a specific skill, absenteeism, training, following office policies, completing assignments, productivity, or knowledge and comprehension to name a few. Use this information to further understand why the problem exists and to ensure that you, and others that may be involved, fully understand the problem.

Using the “people” category in the root cause analysis process, will help to establish a plan for setting expectations.

**Example:**

Problem statement: The employee does not fully complete assignments and all assignments require revisions by the manager.

Root cause analysis category: People

Possible Root causes – Insufficient skills, instructions were not clear, work overload, employee unwilling to complete assignments, poor attitude, unable to learn.

The root causes identified can be further analyzed to determine and validate the key root causes that are actionable.

These are just a few examples, but from this information it is fairly easy to determine that clearly defined expectations may be the real problem. There certainly may be other factors involved here but before taking drastic performance improving measures and disciplinary actions it may be a good idea to evaluate how effectively expectations were communicated in the first place. It is also important to understand the competency level of the individual or team involved. Many managers become involved in time consuming negotiations and legal issues with employees who were disciplined or dismissed for performance reasons when the real reason for the performance issue is directly connected to expectations that were not provided clearly and efficiently and managed on a regular basis. Think of the process of setting clear expectations as a form of prevention (it could be considered a form of risk management) to prevent some major human resource problems.

The other factors: equipment, methods, and materials may also contribute to the problem. Therefore, it is important to look at the whole picture before developing solutions and plans for action.

The good news here is that the analysis of one particular problem can result in a solution or set of solutions that will prevent new problems from developing. A process for defining, communicating and managing expectations can be created which could result in higher levels of performance in many areas, improve morale, and reduce the unpleasantness that often accompanies the delivery of a less than satisfactory a performance appraisal.

It is the leader's role to create a vision, set direction, and inspire followers. It is also the responsibility of the leader to establish a work environment where people know what is expected of them and that they can expect to be treated fairly and with respect. Expectations involve both sides and require serious effort to develop them, communicate them and follow through on them. The results of well communicated and managed expectations benefit everyone and can make a significant difference in the overall performance of an organization and can have a very positive impact on organizational culture.

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## About the Author



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**Frank P. Saladis**, PMP, PMI Fellow is the Owner/Founder of Blue Marble Enterprises Inc. and Project Imaginers. Frank is an accomplished leader and contributor in the discipline of project management. He is the author of 12 published books, the past editor of the All PM Newsletter and the author of over 160 project management articles. Frank provides training and consulting internationally and has educated and entertained countless audiences with a special blend of project management knowledge and tasteful humor. He is also an experienced and well-known project management instructor and consultant and a member of the PMI® Seminars World team of trainers. Mr. Saladis' 35 year career includes 28.5 years with AT&T, 3 years with Cisco Systems, and more than 25 years as a professional trainer, facilitator, mentor and keynote speaker.

Frank is the Originator/Founder of International Project Management Day which launched in 2004 and has been growing in recognition yearly. The goal of International Project Management Day is the worldwide recognition of the many project managers and project teams in every industry including nonprofit organizations and health care who contribute their time, energy, creativity, innovation, and countless hours to deliver products, services, facilities, and provide emergency and disaster recovery services in every city and community around the world.

Frank was PMI's 2006 Person of the Year. Frank is a Project Management Professional, a graduate from the PMI Leadership Institute Master's class, and has contributed significantly to the organization's growth and knowledge base for more than 20 years. His leadership activity within PMI included the position of President of the New York City PMI chapter from 1991-2001, President of the Assembly of Chapter Presidents, and Chair of the Education and Training Specific Interest Group. He received the high honor of the "PMI Fellow Award" in October 2013 and received the very prestigious "PMI Distinguished Contribution Award" in October 2015.

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