



Keyword: Expectations

Setting Clearer Performance Expectations

by Kevin Eikenberry

The annual performance review.

Stating this phrase guarantees *some* reaction for anyone who has ever had one or had to give one as a supervisor or manager. In my experience in working with organizations, that reaction is seldom positive.

The concept behind the performance review or evaluation is a good one. It is a chance for employees/team members to discuss their accomplishments, get feedback on their progress and build a plan for continuous improvement. The idea makes sense, which is why every organization I've worked with has these meetings between a supervisor and an employee.

Unfortunately, while the idea is sound, far too often, in execution, these meetings are ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst. While there are many reasons why this is true, one of those reasons is that supervisors don't know how to do one of the most critical parts of this event effectively – set clear performance expectations.

Without clear expectations from the previous year, the discussion becomes too subjective – one of the major (justified) reasons employees don't find these reviews valuable. Without clear expectations set for the coming year, people don't know what to work on throughout the year, beyond vague generalities or assumptions. This then sets them up for yet another largely subjective review next year.

Some Criteria

These expectations should be:

- Connected to the goals and objectives of the organization
- Clear and agreed upon
- Developed jointly

Applying these three criteria to the expectations you set during these meetings will improve the relevancy and clarity of the expectations. And by jointly developing them you improve the commitment of the employee to both the process and the expectations themselves.



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Getting There

Once you know what successful expectations will look like with the criteria, the next question becomes, “how do we get there?”

Here are some tips to help you identify, clarify and agree to performance expectations.

1. **Start with organizational goals.** Help the employee understand department and organizational goals. Discuss how their work can positively impact the achievement of those goals. Use that perspective to develop any performance expectations that directly link their work to those goals.
 2. **Ask questions.** One of the biggest mistakes you can make during a performance review meeting is to do all of the talking. Get the employee to discuss their expectations and goals for the coming year. Start by asking questions – especially open ended ones. Perhaps you have some very specific things you want to include - you can add your items later in the conversation. Ask first and ask often.
 3. **Be quiet.** If you are going to ask... you have to be quiet and listen. Be patient. They might not have an immediate thought – or they may be scared to say much if this is a different approach than they have experienced in these situations before. Ask the questions expectantly, rephrase them if needed, be patient and keep your mouth shut. If you are going to jointly create these expectations, you have to let them talk.
 4. **Acknowledge their feelings and perspective.** You may not agree with everything they say. You may see their proposed expectations missing the mark slightly. Remember this is a conversation. Don't judge too quickly. Even if you want to influence them to a different view, acknowledge how they feel, even if your feeling is different.
 5. **Challenge them to stretch.** One of the best things we can do for people is encourage them to stretch their performance. Help people raise their expectations a little bit more. How do you know it is a stretch? When it feels like a challenge, but isn't unbelievable. Setting expectations of improvement levels that people can't visualize achieving is likely beyond a stretch. Set expectations that raise the bar a little – and that drive people towards their potential.
 6. **Be specific and descriptive.** The expectations need to be descriptive and clear. If they are vague, they are open to interpretation and won't be met to anyone's satisfaction. Make them specific and write them down.
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7. **Restate and clarify.** The meeting can't end until you have agreement on the expectations, and you can't get agreement unless they are clear. Review the notes that have been written down, and make sure that you both agree that they say what you want them to say, and that when you both read them in 2 days or 2 months, that they will still mean the same thing.

8. **Gain agreement.** Get people to commit to the expectations that have been created. Give space for them to share concerns or frustrations, but leave with a commitment to work towards these expectations. Your organization may want people to sign their performance reviews or plans. Beyond those requirements, having people sign their expectations and agreements is a powerful piece of people committing to achieve something. So consider having people sign, even if it isn't a part of your organization's process.

Taking these steps will help you create job expectations that will meet both the organization's and the individual's needs. It will also be a springboard to helping make those performance reviews more valuable – for everyone.

Final Note

Perhaps as you read this list you didn't see anything earth-shattering or new. If so, my question to you is; are you doing all of these things, even though you know them?



Kevin Eikenberry is a bestselling author, consultant, trainer, speaker, coach, leader, learner, husband and father. He is the Chief Potential Officer of the Kevin Eikenberry Group (www.KEIKENBERRY.COM) and the Creator of the Remarkable Leadership Learning System (www.REMARKABLE-LEADERSHIP.COM), both of which are dedicated to life-long learning and helping Clients unleash their remarkable potential. Interested in becoming the remarkable leader you were born to be? Go to www.REMARKABLE-LEADERSHIP.COM today!
