

**PRACTICAL LESSONS FOR
NEW MANAGERS**

BRINGING UP THE BOSS



RACHEL PACHECO



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CHAPTER 1

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

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One summer, on a muggy Sunday afternoon, my dear friend Sarah and I were out for a vigorous power walk. Typical of such walks, as we were pumping our arms and swinging our hips, we were also discussing life and love, and she shared this gem of a quote that her father coined: “An expectation unarticulated is a disappointment guaranteed.”¹

An expectation unarticulated is a disappointment guaranteed.

This nugget of wisdom came up in the context of our dating lives, but, wow, it’s a powerful concept for management. One thing you may notice as you start to manage is how often you will open an email, get off a Zoom call, or sit in a presentation, and experience a pervasive sense of disappointment.

The internal dialogue in your mind might go something like this:

You spent a week working and this is what you have to show for it?

Or

Yikes—this is what you think client-ready looks like?

Or

How could you possibly think this is good?

Or

Not only did you miss the boat on this one, but you weren't even in the harbor. Scratch that. You weren't even in a coastal state. The boat was in South Carolina, and you were in Kansas.

One of the dirty little secrets of managing is that it is a profoundly frustrating and disappointing job. Your team members will often swing and totally whiff with regards to your expectations. You end up redoing their work, saying harsh things about their abilities, or writing them off as less competent than you thought. This effect is particularly frustrating in a start-up environment, where work moves quickly and everyone just needs to *Get. Stuff. Done.*

But the other dirty little secret of managing is that much of the disappointment is our own fault as managers. We are disappointed because we haven't set and communicated clear, well-defined expectations for our people. Instead, our expectations go unarticulated.

Let me provide a little example to hammer home the point. Recently, a senior manager, Diane, came to me complaining about how a member of her sales team, Lalit, stunk at his job. Lalit didn't follow up on sales leads that Diane talked about during meetings; Lalit came to check-in discussions with Diane with nothing to talk about; and Lalit never brought ideas to the group about how to expand their client footprint. In sum, Lalit wasn't proactive, and Diane was super frustrated by him.

I'm sure you're patting yourself on the back right now, thinking, *I know the answer. I know why Diane failed as a manager. She never told Lalit to be proactive!* Well, my friends, you're wrong. Diane *did* tell Lalit multiple times that he should be more proactive. But she *didn't* show him what it looks like to her when a team member is proactive. She didn't clearly articulate her expectations for his behavior. Lalit was trying to be proactive but had no idea what Diane expected.

Expectation setting is one of the most important things you can do to be a great manager. It's a simple concept, but many managers—especially first-time managers—don't explicitly say what they want and need from

their people. And when your team members are very junior (or it's their first job), not setting clear expectations becomes even more detrimental to everyone's success.

Don't try to manage by mind reading: to be a great boss, you have to set clear, well-defined, and explicit expectations for your team members.

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Before I get into the *how* of good expectation setting, I want to talk a little bit about *why* it's hard to set expectations as a manager.

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FEAR OF BEING A MICROMANAGER

You're hip, you're cool, you want everyone to like you, so you give your team freedom and flexibility. One of the reasons people love working for start-ups is that they don't really have a "boss" per se—just a friendly, slightly older person who sometimes checks in on their work. You're that person! In fact, you read once in a book—a book just like this one—that being hands-off is the best way to manage. You never want to be called a (gasp!) micromanager. You know how important it is to let people "figure things out" as opposed to telling them what to do. Your biggest fear is that your underlings will whisper about how you're an uptight micromanager who controls their lives.

But guess what? You're giving your people significant anxiety because they have no idea what to do. Micromanaging and setting clear expectations are very different beasts. In a totally unscientific study I conducted of ten junior people, I found that ten of them craved clearer direction from their manager and zero people wished their manager were vaguer and more wishy-washy about what she wanted.

It's true that working for a micromanager really stinks. They creepily hover over your laptop and, at times, grab your mouse to make direct changes to your work. My least favorite micromanager used to email me constantly throughout the day asking if my assignment was done. I

wanted to say, “Dude, I’m spending so much time updating you on my progress that I have no time to actually get any work done.”

A great manager sets clear expectations for what the team is looking to achieve and then lets her team member figure out the steps to get there; a micromanager insists on walking up every step with you while holding your hand and telling you where to place your foot and cautioning you that the step might be wet and insisting that you wear galoshes in case it gets wetter and then just decides that you shouldn’t walk up the steps at all and she’ll just do it for you.

So, no, micromanaging isn’t the goal. Painting a clear picture of what “good” looks like is. Get over your fear of being a micromanager and be clear with what you want from your people.

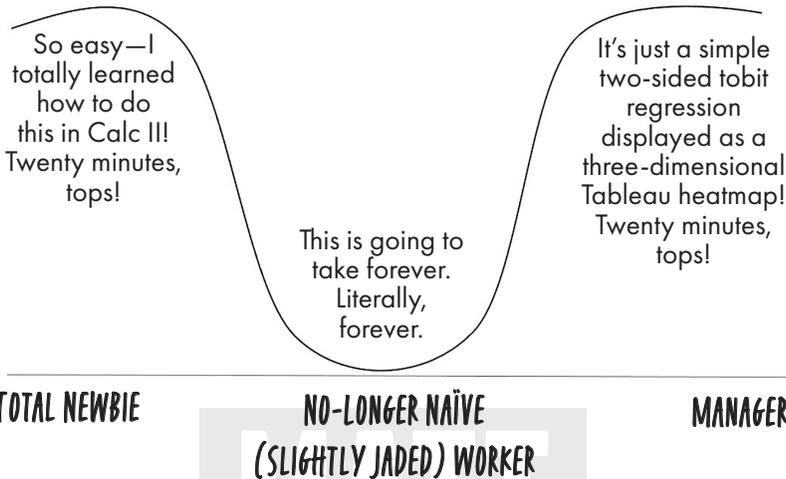
Micromanaging isn’t the goal. Painting a clear picture of what “good” looks like is.

THE DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT

The second reason why we struggle to set clear expectations is not our fault. It’s a subconscious psychological bias called the Dunning-Kruger effect. (Note: this is also a great excuse in a relationship. When your partner yells at you for expecting them to be a mind reader, say, “It’s not my fault. I’m experiencing a subconscious psychological bias!”) This effect is named for the psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger, who found that newbies are overly confident in their ability to complete a task and will underestimate the time it takes to do it.² It also states that an expert will assume that a task that is easy for her to perform is also easy for others to complete.

So when you assign a junior employee a task that you think is easy, quick to do, and doesn’t need explicit instructions, your biases may be getting in the way. You need to remind yourself that the tasks you’ve done hundreds of times may not be self-explanatory for your people. And you must also recognize that your people may erroneously think that they don’t need more time or a deeper explanation to complete the task because of their own subconscious biases about their ability to do the task at hand.

THE DUNNING-KRUGER EFFECT RUNNING RAMPANT IN THE WORKPLACE



You consciously avoid setting expectations because you don't want to micromanage, and you subconsciously don't set expectations because you think your employees already know exactly what to do and how to do it.

Before I keep rambling on about where else cognitive biases wreak havoc in our lives, let's talk about the how: How do you set clear expectations for your team members?

You set clear expectations by always answering the following four questions:

1. What's the objective or end goal?
2. What does good look like?
3. What's the timing?
4. What are examples (if possible)?

THE SUPER-SIMPLE, FOUR-PRONGED APPROACH TO SETTING CRYSTAL CLEAR EXPECTATIONS		
FOUR PRONGS	MORE INFO PLEASE	EXAMPLE
1. What's the objective or end goal?	<p>Why do you need or want this?</p> <p>What are we trying to achieve with this work?</p> <p>What impact will it have on the team, project, client, or customer?</p>	"I'd like a weekly work plan that helps me see the status of each component of your work in one place. It helps me to quickly see where we are behind or on schedule without having to constantly email you for an update. It also allows us to see how delays may impact other pieces of work."
2. What does good look like?	<p>What defines success for this activity or deliverable?</p> <p>How specific can you be about what a quality product looks like?</p>	"A good work plan clearly shows detailed activities, who is doing what, and the expected timing for each of those activities. Additionally, it highlights where we are behind schedule or might run into issues. My strong preference is for this to be in a GANTT chart."
3. What's the timing?	<p>When do you need the output by?</p> <p>When do you want to see a first draft?</p> <p>In what state (e.g., client-ready, draft form)?</p>	"Moving forward, I'd like to see the work plan updated every week and for you to send it to me twenty-four hours before our weekly check-ins. Please send me your draft work plan tomorrow so that I know you're going in the right direction."
4. What are examples, if possible?	Share other work product, information, or content to support employee.	Share some work plans that you've used in the past.

When you give your team member an assignment, explicitly answer all of these questions. In fact, I would suggest writing down the answers to these questions, as it forces you to truly articulate what you expect. If

you can't answer these questions, it might indicate that either the task isn't necessary or that you have no idea what you want out of this work.

These questions are a helpful framework to guide how you give instructions, but they aren't foolproof. Where do I see this approach falling down? No one would dispute the value of setting clear timelines, yet managers often don't want to tell people when an assignment is due or when they need a first draft. This comes back to the fear of micromanaging: For many of us, it's uncomfortable telling people exactly when we want something. We ask them when they think they can have it done, and we may not assert when we actually need it. The long-term result can be that you foster a team culture that is indifferent about deadlines. So be explicit about timing. You'll thank me later.

To sum up, dear reader, as a first-time manager, set clear expectations for your people. And when you think your expectations are clear enough, go back and make them even clearer. Push against the fear of having people think you're bossy or a micromanager. Your employees want to know what you expect and want to know what good looks like in your mind. And if you aren't clear about what you expect, expect to be disappointed.

Set clear expectations for your people. And when you think your expectations are clear enough, go back and make them even clearer.

TL;DR

- Often, we don't articulate what we expect from our team members; this leads to disappointment, frustration, and feeling like our team members are incompetent.
- We don't set expectations because we're afraid of people thinking we're micromanagers; and we overestimate the abilities and competence of junior people.

- The solution is simple: Each time we assign a task or action, we should articulate why the task is necessary and its overall objective, define what good looks like, and state when we want the work done. If possible, we should provide examples of similar work.
- Continue to provide feedback when expectations aren't met and encourage our employees to speak up if they have questions about the expectations of an assignment.

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