

Great leaders do
more than manage
expectations, they
align them

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We've heard this morsel of wisdom for decades -- effective leaders are good at managing employee expectations. It feels right, or at least intuitive. It's simple. It makes sense. But does this advice really hold true in today's environment? Probably not. In our modern world of complex communication, much more is needed.

For decades, power was held squarely by the employers, simply because employees only had access to one or two employment options. That was it. An employer was able to set expectations for its employees and demand they be followed with exactness. Carrots did not exist, but sticks were abundant. After all, what else could the employees do? Where could they go?

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With the internet explosion of the late 90s and early 2000s, however, the power dynamic between employers and employees shifted. For the first time on a large scale, employees had options, and the internet increased access to these possibilities exponentially. Now, it's no longer good enough to simply manage expectations and demand compliance. You now have to do better when addressing expectations. After all, employees have a significant point of leverage within the relationship -- they can always leave.

Not only do employees have the option to leave, they also have access to vast amounts of information that helps supports their cause and sway opinions. Employees know what is happening at rival companies, even if those companies are thousands of miles away. And thanks to social platforms like Instagram, they also know what is happening with

their coworkers down the hall. Expectations are now formed by everyone, at any time, everywhere. Expectations come at you from every angle.

Here are some ways that expectations are created in today's modern information economy

Implied promises from the work environment and company culture.

The everyday environment of an organization implies all sorts of promises. Perhaps a new account executive has heard from others that top sales reps often go on international business trips. He has been seeing success, but is never given the opportunity to travel. He now may feel cheated and resentful.

Rumors and stories from colleagues and peers.

One of the most common and dangerous ways expectations are formed is through rumors and . For example, there is the “ They're going to lay people off” rumor, which can lead to everything from panic to workplace sabotage. On the other side of the coin, there is the “ Management is talking to a venture capital firm, and we're all going to be rich” rumor. Both types can be damaging, and employee behavior will reflect their beliefs about the future state.

News stories and other information from the broader culture.

It's unrealistic to expect employees to see news coverage of IPOs, unemployment rates and other business events and not have that

information affect their expectations. When employees hear the overall

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economy is booming, they are going to expect large pay raises, even if your particular location or market is still stagnant.

Employer brand.

Each organization has two brands, one with its customers and one with current, future and past employees -- the employer brand. The employer brand comes with a host of expectations that will be picked up and carried by your employees, even if some of it is the stuff of urban legend.

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Unexpressed or unclear employer expectations.

Do your employees know what you expect of them? Are your expectations realistic? tell us that nearly half of line-level employees feel the boss's expectations are often muddy or at least not clearly spelled out.

So, with all these expectations swirling around the workplace, successful leaders must do more than simply manage them. They have to clearly align them. How do we go about this? There are three key ways you can go about creating expectation alignment within your organization or team:

1. Know your audience.

You can't possibly align every expectation in your role as a business leader, so your goal should be to focus on those relationships that really matter in achieving your business objectives and in building the right employee experience. I call this list of key relationships your "relationship network."

2. Look for where expectation gaps exist or where they might arise.

An expectation gap is the chasm that exists between the expectations that are created on one side and how people believe those expectations have been met on the other. You should assume that every relationship in your relationship network has some gaps. Take the time to identify, on paper, the nature of these gaps, their causes, and, as will be discussed below, what you are going to do about these gaps.

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3. Bridge those expectation gaps.

Expectation alignment is the process of defining the expectations that exist on both sides -- both tacit and overt -- and then seeking congruence.

Alignment can occur through discussions, but it also takes place through training, employee brand management, individual development, performance reviews, establishing or amending policies, or even through better employee documentation.

Millennials might be the first to point out the need for stronger performance in this area of expectation alignment. They have grown up in an era of information overload. They appreciate the value of taking time to distill vast amounts of information into what is really important.

Failure to align expectations can be costly. If you align expectations, you will be rewarded with delight and loyalty. If you merely manage expectations, you may find employee satisfaction, but not much more. But, if you violate expectations you will be met with suspicion and anger, and in today's

modern world, that means losing the talent you desperately need to compete and win.