

MANAGING THE EXPECTATION GRADIENT, PART 2:

ARRANGEMENTS WE MAKE WITH OTHERS

by Frank Young Ph.D.¹[1]

I have always been totally blown away by the awesome power of understatement.

You might recall that, in chapter 1, we reviewed the importance of managing expectations regarding arrangements we make with ourselves (Nov. 2002). We considered factors in goal setting and goal adjustment to maintain maximum motivation and personal development in achieving what we set out to do. In this article we examine how we manage others' expectations about our commitments to them. Most of these guidelines are self-evident, but they may serve as a handy checklist when negotiating expectations.

These are principles of integrity, margin and boundary management, and ultimately, self-esteem based on a record of following through. While many of the examples are from a career context, these principles of mental fitness also apply in family and social relationships as well. From what we know from research about stress management and the processes of Flow and enjoyment, several crucial points are:

1. Resolve to under-commit, and thus, over-deliver. This first point is difficult to maintain in trying times, because in many of the projects or experiences in which we compete for the contract for a project, we often feel we must offer the most value-added in the least amount of time or for the least cost. Thus we are tempted to manage our own margins too tightly, and proceed with projections on an overly optimistic best-case scenario. A similar temptation can occur in many organizations, most of which are driven by a productivity and growth ethic. When it comes to annual reviews and evaluations, the outcome bar is often set higher, whereas supportive resources or market opportunities may be

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lower. We are often encouraged to do more with less. To maintain our employment status, we often fall into this frequent trap of over-commitment, and its resultant months of stress. To avoid this pitfall, use some informational tools.

2. Benchmark your role with industry standards about how long a job should take, at what level of quality, with what administrative or technical resources, and at what level of hourly payment by salary or contract.

Perhaps this sometimes difficult research step is the most crucial element in setting and asserting realistic standards. You want to wind up making a reasonable commitment, rather than a stressful promise, when shaping the expectations of other people or organizations. Also, whenever you consider contracting to render a service to others, you need to be astute in estimating both billable hours and administrative or research hours to prepare to deliver the product or package of services. Often, inadequate estimates result in cost or time overruns that add stress and detract from a reputation for dependability.

3. Regard yourself as a precision instrument that has optimal range and output specifications. You may be regarded by others as a human cyber, a cog in the organizational machine, but you will be ground up by that machine if you do not know what constitutes your personal limit or redline. This redline could include number of overtime hours per week, and family and personal commitment limits. If the organization demands performance and overtime that is greater than you can healthily sustain in your life balance, inquire what your resources might be if you found yourself in a state of temporary or permanent disability. Hopefully, your research in this area will allow you to negotiate more assertively about the resources you would need to attain the performance targets to which they want you to commit.

4. Make sure you assert the conditions of support you need to attain your mission or delivery of outcomes.

Support management includes access to staff, equipment, funding, relevant information, staff training, and technical consultation. It should also include the margins of time and energy you will need to complete the mission successfully. Also, you need to assess whether your organization has allowed for contingencies of upset, non-delivery, and other shortfalls beyond your abilities to control. If not, you need to mention this up-front as limitations in your potential ability to meet the desired objectives.

5. With the contract of delivery now set, monitor the context of responsibility ongoingly to make the necessary adjustments as needed.

In order to ensure value-added, you may need to re-assess the changing contexts of the business and personal environments to assure that the contextual goalposts have not shifted overnight. You need to have an ongoing monitoring and feedback procedure in place to ensure you are in the same field in which you negotiated the contract. If a field change has occurred, you may need to alert others of a potential volume or deadline adjustment.

6. Being true to your word is a labor of love, investing in building your social capital. In every life event where you follow through with what you said or committed to others, you are investing in your own self-esteem. At the same time, with each completion or delivery of service you are building social capital and community connection with a reputation of reliability, credibility, trust, and mutual respect. Often it takes years to build that reputation, and only a small number of screw-ups to damage or even destroy it. Thus you need a strategy to redeem situations where you have made a mistake in not following through, and thus disappointing others.

7. There are no mistakes, only lessons. Lessons will be repeated until they are learned. In situations where you failed to follow through with your word, identify the factors that interfered. Generate a plan to cover these factors before you consider recommitting to deliver a similar project or service. Reset the expectations of others if you are on the jagged edges of a learning curve. Preserve your integrity while you are learning the skills required to deliver consistently.

8. Integrity is doing what is true to your internal values, even if no one is watching. Although the general theme of this article is the management of others' expectations of you, your follow-through is also important when you are the only witness. In fact, it is even more rewarding to know yourself as a person who honors and completes commitments. This is a primary pathway for positive self-esteem, an essential ingredient of mental fitness.
