
Leading Expectations

Positive expectations are definitely helpful—as long as they're in balance.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Sep 01, 2016

Seems like everyone has their slant on expectations. This ranges from "Always aim high" to "Better not to have them." Or "expect the best, prepare for the worst." Then there's essayist Anne Lamott's: "Expectations are premeditated disappointments."

What's clear is: a) expectations are crucial to performance and b) they can cut several ways. Expectations pave a crossroads. They're mindsets that stem from past experiences that are projected into the future. If a person has a history of failing, the default is to expect him to again fall short. Organizationally, one expectational path can lead to "what's-the-use?" dissatisfaction, the other to significantly higher performance.

Expectations pretty much always exist. They're the opposite of pure mindfulness, where only the "Now" is noted and past experiences and biases don't overshadow. It's hard, bordering on impossible, to not have some kind of expectations (then, I've not met anyone I consider an "enlightened," ever-mindful being.) I've heard some contend, "I have no expectations anything will change," by which they really mean they have a negative, give-up expectation of stasis, that the status quo will continue, that standing problems won't be solved or that negative momentum will continue downhill.

Highly accomplished leaders understand the potential power and pitfalls of expectations and do their best to steer toward improvement and away from dissatisfaction. Many would-be agents of improvement don't grasp how leading expectations is as much an art as a science. Insightful leaders know that expectations can be positive or negative—and each has advantages and pitfalls.

People tend to be satisfied when their expectations are exceeded and disgruntled

when getting less than they expected. So, some say, why not just set very low expectations? Because of the downsides of harboring negative expectations. Such a low mindset creates perpetual uphill battles. People caught in this often opt out before any change process even begins. ("It's just our management re-examining their navels again.") Some adopt a negative outlook to protect themselves from being continuously let down. They disengage way before giving changes a chance.

However, when leaders can overcome negative expectations, this can wake up, energize, and motivate buy-in and further upgrades. This is a main reason we request active resisters be included when we train workers as Safety Catalysts within client companies. Time and again, turning around naysayers dramatically elevates others' receptivity and excitement around Safety.

A positive expectation mindset can convince yourself and others you're confident. This can be infectious. Such "Positive Thinking" makes it more likely you'll look for and take advantage of opportunities that arise, even with negative occurrences. What happens if your orders are down yet there are still expectations of continuous Safety improvement? Do you cut training and staff and Safety efforts or, like Honda, tap this slower time as an opportunity to ramp up Safety training that was tougher to schedule when things were go-go?

Remember that having *overly* positive expectations has definite downsides:

1. It can blindside you. When focusing only on aimed for improvements, it's easier to gloss over indications that performance is slipping. The path of change often looks like the ups and downs chart of a highly successful stock. But if I assume that our company is improving straight line and people are happy with their work, it's easy to interpret silence on the plant floor as a sign of contentment and miss that it might instead reflect tension, fear, or disgruntlement. Or by assuming a manager is able to drive productivity he'll be an equally strong Safety advocate.
2. Like an over-inflated balloon, highly positive expectations can deflate the ability to flex and prevail if things fall short or expectations/plan go badly wrong. Just as a Pollyanna mindset may underestimate obstacles in the way of making something positive happen. ("No problem, it will all work out somehow.")
3. One-sided positive expectations can set up everyone for disappointment (leading to bailout?) when down cycles occur. And only-positive futurists can lose leadership credibility.
4. Too positive expectations can lead to resting on organizational laurels. I've seen several companies that moved from subpar to average to good Safety performance who became overly satisfied with their accomplishments, expecting they no longer

had to work as hard to get better, that they could coast. But the only coasting that's self-perpetuating runs downhill.

Positive expectations are definitely helpful—as long as they're in balance. Start by mindfully watching your own default expectations. What do you accept as "inevitable" in Safety performance? If you believe that older workers are bound to break down, it's likely that workers will begin accepting this as well, and that you won't put in the effort needed to actually make significant improvements (or, at best, just halfheartedly go through some motions to show you've tried).

If you expect a quick and effortless intervention will transform ongoing and significant injury problems—that you can "fix" longstanding, cumulative soft-tissue injuries by showing a video, writing yet another lifting policy and procedure, exhorting workers to "lift with their legs," handing out backbelts—you and everyone else are likely to be disappointed and your Safety performance flatten. Rather, shift your expectations toward making small, critical changes in ergonomics, training, and structure that can significantly impact these pervasive injuries (see my many articles on this for specifics).

Unearth your own underlying expectations; chart those of others; create and implement a strategy for refining, clearly communicating and watching both the subtle and measurable results of managerial and worker mindsets.

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