

Inc.

“ I am a creativity catalyst who inspires creative entrepreneurs to financial freedom while following their passions ”

Bill Baren, Creativity Catalyst



▶ START-UP ▶ RUNNING A BUSINESS ▶ FINANCE ▶ LEADERSHIP & MANAGING ▶ SALES & MARKETING

Topics > [Leadership and Managing](#) > [Human Resources](#) > [Motivating Workers](#) >

How to Communicate Employee Expectations Effectively

Draw the best out of employees through thoughtful collaboration.

By [Alyssa Danigelis](#) | Aug 5, 2010

RELATED ARTICLES

[Honest Expectations](#)

[How to Build a Corporate Culture of Trust](#)

[How to Attract Talent to Your Start-Up](#)

[What to Include In an Employee Handbook](#)

SUGGESTED LINKS

[Guilt-Free Giving](#)

[Small Businesses Grapple with New Health Care Law](#)

[Is Your State Entrepreneur-Friendly?](#)

[How to Find a Bay Area Start-up Location](#)

[How to Make Health Care Reform Work for Your Business](#)

[Some Business Owners Upbeat](#)

Employee expectations gone awry can practically be spotted from a helicopter miles away. The tension becomes so thick it changes the air. Anxiety spreads. Alliances form. A mutiny brews. At the failing end of the communication spectrum, the workplace resembles a *Survivor* tribal council.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Effective communication can give the workplace a friendly atmosphere where employees are comfortable and can focus on doing what they do best. To get there, executive coaches advise a grounded communication approach that's equal parts clarity, empathy, and honesty.

Communicating Employee Expectations: Keep the Conversation Alive

[Jamie Walters](#) chuckles when she hears about businesses that merely do annual reviews. The author of the book *Big Vision, Small Business* and the founder of business

consulting firm [Ivy Sea-Sophialon](#) suggests having a casual conversation on a regular basis instead of waiting for an annual review. Meet once a month at least to talk about goals and progress so there aren't any surprises. "Even with quarterly reviews people can be caught off-guard with something that's built up," she says.

Schedules are busy but [Walters](#) emphasizes how important it is to make time for these conversations, especially during transitions. She remembers a small business where the owner brought in a new manager and then was absent from the workplace. The new manager turned out to be, well, a *micromanager*. Tensions rose, unbeknownst to the owner.

"It was basically a mutiny. They said, 'Either you get rid of this person or we're all leaving,'" Walters recalls. "Trust had been fractured." Her consulting firm became the impartial third party that came in to help the business get through it. Turns out the manager was dealing with a family health crisis at home. "People ended up staying and he ended up turning the corner," she says.

Having regular conversations without the formality of an annual review contributes to an atmosphere of confidence. Suddenly it's easier for both employee and manager to discuss concerns and do course correction. This valuable time is also an ideal way to convey what the employee is doing well.

[Dig Deeper: How to Improve Your Employees' Work-Life Balance](#)

Communicating Employee Expectations: Affirm What's Working

It sounds so simple: Coming at expectations from a positive standpoint makes productivity soar. [Bill Baren](#), founder and president of Bill Baren Coaching in [San Francisco](#), once had a client who created and tracked initiatives, but found that nothing was going right. Deadlines were being missed and the results were poor.

Baren discovered that employee meetings had been concentrating on where they were failing and what the team could do to fix each situation. Baren offered up a different strategy. "They started having the approach of, 'What's going right and how can we do more of that?'" he says. "After six months they were back on track."

Recognizing outstanding employee performance can be done in different ways, from a formal award to praise during one of the regular conversations Walter recommends. "Did you know you shine at this? I really recognize you do well at this," she says. "It doesn't have to be a program."

[Dig Deeper: 7 Tips for Motivating Employees](#)

Communicating Employee Expectations: Invite Honesty

Honesty can be frightening, but it's also the release valve that prevents problems from building up into untenable pressure. Baren has his clients do an exercise in brutal honesty where they ask employees to rate their skill as a manager on a scale from one to 10. Then they find out from employees what would make them a 10. "This isn't a review," he says. "It's wanting to be better."

"People don't like conflict or giving what seems like negative feedback, so it either comes out sharply in a moment or it becomes vague and not clear enough for the person to act on," Walters observes. Being upfront about your own management and ownership responsibilities with employees humanizes you while reinforcing the business's larger goals.

Walter also suggests admitting when the answer is unknown and using that as an opportunity for closer collaboration. For example, if there is a position that has just been created, she would say as much and propose working together to fine-tune it over time. "You've got basically a little family and that's a series of specific interpersonal relationships, people who joined for a specific reasons," she says. Honesty breeds trust, so the next time a problem arises, employees know there is a potential path to resolving it.

[Dig Deeper: How to Set Business Goals](#)

Communicating Employee Expectations: Step Into Their Shoes

Great leaders spend a great deal of time thinking about whom they put on their team and how to get the best out of those employees. The more challenging the subject, the more important it is to put oneself in the employee's place. [Paul Black](#) is an executive coach with expertise in communications who works for the management consultancy Philosophy IB in [Florham Park, New Jersey](#). He suggests doing mental preparation first.

"Remember who you're talking to," he says. "What would you want to hear? How would you want to hear it?" Take a moment to sit on the other side of the table. [Black](#) remembers a client that didn't do that. A large pharmaceutical company reorganization was announced in a one-page e-mail from a senior executive that didn't answer the inevitable employee question, "What does this mean for me?" Black and his team were

hired to help. They created a series of brief, clear communications to employees that addressed concerns point by point.

When there is important news to deliver, you shouldn't be winging it. "We have to communicate not in our own style but in the style of the people we're speaking to," Baren says. "It's almost like mirroring. If I am able to mirror how you like to receive information then it's going to be much easier for you to feel like you've got it."

[Dig Deeper: How to Improve Employee Retention](#)

Communicating Employee Expectations: Become a Mentor and Calibrate Workloads

One of the questions that employees probably wish they heard more often is, "What work do you want to be doing?" [Nan Crawford](#), an executive leadership coach based in the [San Francisco Bay Area](#), advises connecting to the strengths and passions an employee brings to the organization. "If we ask them what work they want to do then they'll be more energetic about it," she says.

Offering employees the resources and knowledge base to accomplish that work can foster leadership within the business. "A lot of times I've found that people want to be part of a high-learning environment even though they're coming from top-down environments," Walters says. "The invitation to learn more takes time and that really surprised me."

Walters cites an example of a small business where the owner took the first employee out for lunch on a regular basis, even as the operation expanded and more people joined the payroll. The two gave and received constructive feedback. Eventually, after being given new projects she had expressed interest in tackling, the employee became vice president of client services.

Creating a deadline is easy; creating a realistic deadline is much more difficult. Having a deep understanding of what each employee does will make the deadline-setting process go smoothly. "Oftentimes in the workplace we get this expectation plopped down in front of us, 'Here go do this,' without having the manager or business owner really looking at it from the other person's perspective," Baren says. "Expectations cannot be mandates. There has to be some co-creative juice along the way."

Collaboration means checking in with an employee on how the work is progressing and adjusting when necessary.

"Even people who are very good at what they do have more on their plate than they can get to," [Crawford](#) says. When giving an employee a new priority, leaders have to be honest about what has already been tasked to that employee and be willing to lift work off their plate if necessary.

Crawford also suggests that successfully managing employee expectations around workloads starts with managing leadership directives. She recommends carefully considering new opportunities before agreeing to them. The ability to stay focused on business that's directly in line with the organization's mission translates into success. Don't be afraid to reject tasks that are a slog for everyone without providing meaningful gains, either. "Get out of the 'That's what we've always done' mentality," Crawford says. Sticking to meaningful, beneficial work brings to the fore all the reasons your employees were chosen for the job in the first place.

Ultimately, the word "expectation" turns out to be a bit of a misnomer. The more appropriate word is "partnership."