

Why Managing Expectations Is Crucial to Our Wellbeing

We need to hop into the pilot seat for the significant expectations in our lives, explains Jason Liem



As a child, I thought my eyes were windows to the world around me. That what I saw was a precise replication of reality. I learned from Biology 101 that that is a complete fabrication.

As I learned in introductory biology, our brains are locked in a solid black box that we call our skulls. There are neither windows nor doors. The only means we have to orient ourselves in the world is through our senses, which arrive as chemical and electrical signals. Then our brains, with all their varied and complicated processing, create a simulation of what they interpret the world is like around us.

Blind Spots

We have all experienced optical illusions where our senses interpret something one way, but we rationally know what we see cannot be so. So our brains are making up a story about reality, but that storyline may only be a fragment of a greater story.

It's not about doubting everything that comes through our senses. It's about looking for our blind spots to become better thinkers. It can also help with empathy. When others misperceive reality, we may disagree with their interpretation, but we can understand where it originates.

To approach this challenge, I think it helps to know that the brain is telling us stories about the minor things we perceive, like the motion of objects – but it also tells us stories about some of the most complex things we think about, creating assumptions and expectations.

When it comes to our expectations, if we come face to face with ambiguity, our brains fill in the ambiguity using whatever we're most familiar with, which usually means we draw from our past experiences.

So when there is missing information, or the information we're receiving is unclear, our



brains will take the liberty of filling gaping holes in the story so we can make sense of the situation. The challenge is that our brains make many unconscious inferences, and they don't tell us that it's an inference. The result of this is that we may be turning a fictional story into a fantasy. In other words, our expectations of ourselves, others, and situations can be completely misconstrued and inaccurate.

False expectations play a role in many psychosocial strains, such as anxiety and depression, due in part to overestimating future threats or failure.

In this piece, I want to explore the importance of managing expectations and being aware of cognitive biases.

What Are Expectations?

Expectations refer to the beliefs we hold about the outcomes of events. While our expectations play an essential role in determining what happens and can contribute to goal-directed behaviour, they can also lead to disappointment when reality does not match what we had hoped would happen.

Have you recently...

- Held a picture in your mind of how something will play out?
- Anticipated a particular outcome?
- Had a concrete idea of what you want or need from a situation?

Each of these is a form of expectation. Sometimes, we might get so attached to our expectations that we cannot see the reality of a situation. This mismatch can prevent us from taking action or making decisions that would be in our best interest.

How to Manage Expectations

Learning how to manage your expectations can be helpful when you are trying to avoid the expectations vs. reality trap.

Become aware of your expectations

The first step is to use active awareness and consciously direct our attention. In this case, we want to think about our thinking and note the expectations we've pinned to a situation. This awareness is

one way of avoiding the expectations vs. reality pitfall.

For example, when entering a new situation, we can ask ourselves, "What do I expect to happen?" Then we can ask ourselves a second question: "Where did I come up with these expectations, and are they realistic?"

We may feel disappointed if an expectation fails to materialise into reality. Then we can ask ourselves, "Was it realistic to expect what I was hoping for?" Asking this or similar questions can teach us to manage our expectations.

An important aspect is also to assess our confidence. How confident are we that our expectations will play out? What are we basing our beliefs on? Could we be too confident, or are we feeling overwhelmingly unconfident?

Confidence

Confidence and expectations are two sides of the same coin. Although different, they are connected.

Albert Bandura, who performed original research on confidence in 1977 at Stanford University, said, "...expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and adverse experiences." In other words, Bandura suggested that the more strongly a person believes in themselves, the more they will invest in their effort to succeed.

In a recent interview on my podcast, [It's an Inside Job](#), I spoke about confidence with Dr Ian Robertson, the author of *How Confidence Works: The New Science of Belief*.

He spoke about how confidence is the most valuable resource a person can have because it empowers action, which yields success, causing mood-enhancing and anxiety-diminishing brain changes.

He noted that confidence is neither optimism nor self-esteem. Instead, it is a combination of how the brain encodes the results of already-achieved success and how this translates into determination to achieve further success. In addition, it is about how we value ourselves, the extent to which we feel in control, and our ability to harness a feeling of empowerment for action. Finally, a sense of confidence is a set of beliefs about our ability to execute particular actions.

Apathy

Apathy means a person has given up. Low dopamine levels drive this state, which directly links to understimulation of the brain's reward network.

Anger

Anger is a heightened state of frustration driven by too much noradrenaline because a person's initial effort doesn't produce the desired outcome.

Anxiety

This state occurs when a person has a picture in their head of what they want to achieve but can't see a way forward.

Activated

This mental state drives a person to take a course of action while simultaneously expecting there will be a successful outcome as a result of their efforts. In this state, we receive higher levels of dopamine, which gives us an incredible boost of motivation while being a solid antidote to anxiety.

Dropping the Ball

Why do we frequently neglect managing expectations?

From my experience coaching clients across several industries, it's not common for people to proactively address expectations. However, when we don't proactively manage expectations, it increases the risk of workplace conflicts and can also threaten organisational performance.

People don't consciously avoid managing expectations. Instead, many of us don't know why talking about interpersonal issues such as expectations is essential. When things are not on the radar, they are not considered necessary and, as a result, are not addressed.

People put concrete topics first

From my experience, many organisations prioritise quantitative and concrete topics such as technical, numerical, or project-related issues over qualitative and interpersonal issues. Many organisations I engage with speak highly of the importance of psychological safety and feedback culture, but at the same time, many struggle

with establishing the fundamentals of these principles in their organisations. Why is this?

People find it hard to switch to a relationship-level discussion

I think the main reason is people find it hard to engage with what is often called the soft skills (from my experience, we should rename them hard skills). Talking about expectations requires moving from a content-level discussion to a relationship-level discussion.

Sounds easy enough, but if we have not invested the time to lay the groundwork of trust and transparency, then it is not something we can so quickly implement.

Talking about expectations at an interpersonal level requires that we have established trust on an individual level and [psychological safety](#) on a team level. These are prerequisites to openly addressing expectations and constructively aligning them. The lack of confidence and psychological safety makes it hard for people to switch to a relationship-level discussion.

Guidelines for Managing Expectations at Work

Expectations are the connective tissue between individuals, teams, and departments. Therefore, we must know what our company, executive, and peers expect from us. This same reasoning also applies the other way around. People need to know the expectations we have of them. If we don't take the time to clarify expectations, the brain will take the liberty of taking the bits it does know and piecing together its own story.

Communicate expectations early

The most important part of setting and respecting others' expectations is

communicating this information early in the relationship. By introducing your expectations in the beginning stages of a professional relationship, you can help establish consistent guidelines.

Assume expectations are not aligned

Talk about them and write them down. As previously stated, there is a natural tendency in organisations not to talk about expectations. Thus, your first step to effectively managing expectations is to be aware that they are essential but rarely addressed. Take the first step and talk about them. In many cases, it even makes sense to write them down and make them available beyond your discussion.

Reinforce expectations with reminders

From time to time, reinforcing expectations ensures that they stay on a person's mental radar. Supervisors and colleagues might not always remember the specifics of our expectations. Like ourselves, they probably have complex lives with many moving parts. Sharing a reminder helps to align actions and allows people to manage the time and logistics of their day.

Align expectations with skills and abilities

Aligning expectations ensures team members can meet the expectations associated with their skillset. Setting our expectations when striving for a goal is equally important, so they are realistic and achievable.

Hold yourself and others accountable

Accountability is a critical factor in healthy, successful expectations and boundaries. Keeping yourself and others accountable fosters a system that positively encourages feedback on how to improve work. In essence, this is the foundation for building a feedback culture. These conversations

involve asking questions and discussing solutions about how to meet individual and group expectations. In addition, it's vital to determine what factors played a role in any setbacks and create goals to ensure everyone can reach them.

Communicate with your executive

Your executive can be a great ally in providing constructive feedback for establishing and maintaining expectations and boundaries. Communicating your needs and the team's needs to your executive helps them develop and align their expectations.

The Last Word

Our brains naturally and automatically generate expectations of future outcomes. These expectations are fine for most of the trivial and day-to-day bits and pieces that make up our lives.

We need to hop into the pilot seat for the significant expectations in our lives. If we can invest the time to think about our thinking and manage our expectations, this, in large part, will help us avoid the pitfalls and disappointments of unrealistic expectations.



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs

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