



The Effective Organization

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Not So Great Expectations

Around fifteen years ago, I worked with a high-tech company that had a very generous work from home policy. Every engineer was provided an ISDN line and a high end workstation. Outside of a very few mandatory meetings, engineers could choose to work at home or come into the office. Productivity was high; the people working from home felt that management was demonstrating a great deal of trust in them, and they wanted to live up to those high expectations.

As the company grew, a new VP of engineering came in. He was concerned that engineers might be goofing off when working at home, so he started restricting the hours that engineers could work outside the office. He never claimed to have any reason for his beliefs, other than a “feeling.” Productivity declined, which only reinforced his belief that people were goofing off. Eventually, people became so annoyed that they really did start to goof off: once again, they were living up to expectations. Unfortunately, the expectations weren’t so great. The VP had successfully created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

More recently, I witnessed the new president of an organization take the attitude that the members of the company needed to be

forced to do their jobs. The more the president treated employees as lazy or unmotivated, the more they started to act lazy and unmotivated. The harder he pushed, the more they resisted. Despite the poor economy, formerly fiercely loyal employees started to openly discuss quitting. The experience was unpleasant and exhausting for all concerned. Sure enough, everyone was living up to expectations.

In the world of sports, it turns out that there’s a very good way to almost guarantee that an athlete will be, at best, a mediocre performer: treat them that way from the beginning. Conversely, assuming that someone will be a top performer is one of the best ways of turning them into a top performer. While there are certainly exceptions in both cases, in general, what you expect is what you get. Both individual athletes and teams who act like winners tend to become winners. It’s much easier to succeed when you expect success than when you expect failure.

The business world is fundamentally no different so long as one critical element is in place: people. It’s entirely possible that Klingons will behave differently. If you happen

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to be employing Klingons, you’re on your own.

Most people, however, will strive to become the person you tell them they are. The trick is to make sure you’re telling them that they’re the type of person who succeeds.

Start by drawing favorable comparisons with people who aren’t present. When you tell someone that they’re doing the worst job of anyone you’ve ever seen, you only reduce their motivation to work hard. When you tell someone that they’re doing better than the rest of the team, you create a competitive mindset and team performance will suffer. When you tell

someone that they're doing a better job than anyone you worked with at your last company, that increases their desire to work harder without compromising team performance.

Celebrate successes, and remind everyone of how their hard work led to that success. Conversely, when something doesn't work out, treat the failure as an aberration. Assume that it's temporary, random, and not any particular person's fault. It's merely an obstacle to overcome. Then brainstorm ways of avoiding it in the future. People are far more willing to take responsibility for their mistakes, and work to correct them, when you allow them to save face.

Constantly highlight victory. Be vivid: make sure everyone knows and is enthusiastic about the company's goals. You want your team moving toward success, not just away from failure. Give your team someone to strive for, not

something to avoid. It's hard to push people, but easy to let them pull. Your enthusiasm sets the tone.

Act as if you've already succeeded. Project confidence. While it's fine to make sure people are aware of risks to the project or the company, don't dwell on failure and don't pass your fears or uncertainties to your team. If necessary, get your own cheerleader who will help you present the right image to your team.

Expect high performance and make sure you find it. Praise the behaviors you want repeated. Demonstrate your trust in your team and they will become worthy of that trust. Make sure your actions and your words send the same message.

What you expect is what you'll get. Your team will live up to your expectations, so take the time to make sure you're setting great expectations.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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