



Management and Performance Associates – August, 2010

Realistic expectations or frustration? Your choice.

“Honey, please wait for me in heaven and we will build our nest around cotton clouds”

Free translation of a fragment of “Wait for me in heaven”, a Bolero by Paquito López Vidal, Puerto Rican musician and composer.

The above quote was immortalized by the great Spanish Director, Pedro Almodovar, in his movie Matador. But, what is the connection with this month newsletter? Let's see:

- What are the risks involved when one person assumes that the other one is waiting for him?
- How would one feel if, when arriving to heaven, one realized that his better half is simply not there?
- What would have happened if both parties had had a dialogue about their mutual expectations before embarking on a celestial trip?

Unrealistic expectations about the other party will damage relationships (it does not matter if we are talking about boss-employee, peers, friends or partners). In a typical example: the boss was expecting that a staff member would attend a meeting, while the same employee was sure that her boss would be the one representing their department. As a consequence, nobody attended the important meeting.

Many times we go through life “expecting that...”, “assuming that...”, “wishing that”..., “believing that...”, “imagining that...”, instead of understanding if the other person can or cannot fulfill our expectations. This is possible in the romantic world of the boleros, but in real life, especially in the corporate world, this is simply inadmissible.

There is a wonderful tool that we may use to strengthen a relationship called **“aligning expectations about the other person”** (and vice versa). Imagine a weight balance. On one of the plates you place your beliefs, wishes, expectations, aspirations, and assumptions, and on the other plate, the other person places his skills, capacities,

possibilities and previous commitments in relation to the other person's expectations.

Let's see an example: John (*left plate*) is Mary's boss. *He has an ambiguous expectation that she will increase her sales. He has an ambiguous wish about a positive and immediate impact on her image. His premise – not validated with Mary is that he is sure she can accomplish that in three months. On her part, Mary (right plate) hopes that John will help her to improve her selling skills over the next three months (capacity to be built) and that he will allow some time for her to build confidence with her newly acquired skills (possibility). Mary wishes that John won't ask for concrete results during this time, and that he allow her to finish her classes in finance (Mary's time commitment).*

Alignment will happen only when these two plates are balanced. When the plates are not balanced (and it is absolutely probable that they are not) there are two possible alternatives: keep on dreaming about unreal situations that will cause huge frustration or start aligning expectations, coming to an agreement.

Therefore, what we need to do is put in action an intense two-way communication exercise. In this exercise, one expectation (an assumption about the future, involving a person or a fact) becomes an outcome in line with the possibilities of the other party. This is very different from “what I want the other person to do.” This does not guarantee that the result will be exactly the same as the expectation, but at least we are starting from a more realistic beginning.

If Mary does not fulfill John's expectations she will, for sure, cause disappointment. If she exceeds the expectation, it will be a pleasant surprise for John. Whatever the outcome may be, if we start with mutually aligned expectations we will avoid surprises and drama. At the same time, we will have tools to understand what worked and what didn't, and be able to initiate an action plan.



Living in a world of unaligned expectations about “what” can be accomplished and “when” it has to be ready, in addition to the pressure to comply, we end up committing to unreal deadlines and impossible tasks, stuck in a “*wishful thinking*” situation which, most of the time, leads to frustration.

How many times has the IT representative promised that the system would be ready in three months when in reality nothing could be done before nine months? A quick investigation would reveal that the three months were promised by the programmer, as a consequence of the “wishful thinking” attitude, and agreeing to the pressures from the boss, user, client, etc.

Let’s examine some possible ideas:

1. When considering an assumption, start the dialogue saying “I am assuming that...”

Assuming something is not necessarily bad, provided that we validate our assumptions and data with the other party. As mentioned in our July 2010 newsletter “I am not crazy, I am just not you,” different people will think, feel and act in different ways. The fact that I want someone to do something does not guarantee that the other can do it, or want to do it, or know how to do it. If you act this way, you will avoid negative emotions, disappointment, anger and conflict. “*I assume that you will attend the monthly interdepartmental meeting.*” If you hear the question “*what meeting?*” careful, something is not aligned.

2. Clearly express, with no ambiguity, your expectations (what is needed and wished for from the other party).

Better to take the time to communicate beforehand than to complain later. Say “*what I need you to do is...*” or “*what I expect from you Thursday after lunch is ...*” Of course, saying it is not enough. The dialogue should continue with questions such as: “*how does that sound to you?*”, “*what do you need to make it happen?*” and “*How can I help?*” You won't always hear what you want to hear. If you are not open to hear a “no” as an answer then it is not a

dialogue, but an order. If that is the case, be sure to provide the context and the reasons.

3. Careful. Sometimes, we are the ones generating false expectations of ourselves.

The day to day pressure causes us to demand more and more from ourselves. We include more items in our agenda than we can possibly handle, without communicating to the team that “our” expectations regarding “their” capacity can be unrealistic. *Think of a client calling the boss on Friday at 6 pm to request a proposal to be on his desk Monday by 9 am.*

This is not about saying “no” (we understand that saying no to a client or to a boss is a luxury that we cannot allow to ourselves in the current environment). We need to understand the reason for the deadline and to communicate realistic deliverables. A better reply would be something like: “*It is a pleasure to work on this proposal for you. The soonest we can prepare it is Wednesday afternoon. Is that acceptable? The rest is negotiation.*”

Once you are committed to a deadline or a task there is only one possibility: do it. If not, we will be on a path paved by painful explanations, excuses, and blaming. Therefore, before committing to something, it is much better to ask **can I really do it.**

4. Getting angry is never the best option.

By not following points 1,2,3 you will be following a recipe for delicious frustration. Many times we ask for help assuming that the other person will have no inconvenience helping us. Then, when the answer is “no,” we get mad. We propose a change in paradigm and ask why the other person said no. Have a conversation to understand his/her reasons. Is it a matter of knowledge (do not know), skills (don't know how), or attitude (don't want to)? Whatever the answer, you will have more information, and it will be easier to align expectations.

5. Make agreements.

In our workshops, whenever we talk about expectations, we always comment on the huge



difference between having an expectation and making an agreement. Here's an example: *The housewife, right after dinner, complains that her husband has not cleaned the dishes. Clearly, that was her expectation, and seeing a pile of dirty dishes while her husband watches TV brings her enormous frustration. When we asked her if they had an agreement about doing dishes her reply was "There was no need to, that's the right thing to do." Careful! "The right thing to do" is in her mind, but it is not part of pre-established agreement.*

Lesson learned: expectations that are not verbalized can be divorced from reality. The bridge we need to make is called AGREEMENT.

Back to our opening quote. If the lines were: "What about if we meet again in heaven – assuming this place really exists – to rebuild our home?" perhaps we would not be composing a great bolero, but, for sure, we would be aligning expectations and avoiding frustrations.

Sharing Best Practices

This month, we have invited Mariano Carpintero Aras, to share his best practices in connection with this topic. Mariano is a Human Resources Manager, at SC Johnson, based at the company headquarters in Racine, Wisconsin.

As any leader in a corporation, many times I am faced with the challenge of clarifying "unaligned expectations." On one side we have the disappointed boss (peer, team member) because his expectations were not met. On the other side, the organization, which many times send messages that are often not actively listened to, or worse, not even delivered by its leaders. Employees do not listen (or do not want to listen to) and the organization repeats the same formula, to death. Then, how do we break this vicious cycle? Without having a definite solution, I have found some ideas that have allowed me a higher level of success.

Having conversations with grownups is neither easy nor pleasant. But if we want our employees to assume the expectations we have for them, it is time to treat them as such. The first thing to do is to

understand why we are having this conversation. I do like to list my expectations as "I want/wish/need." It is a two way street dialogue, not a monologue without the possibility of negotiation.

Then, incorporating SMART objectives is critical. Also critical is to define HOW. The WHAT needs to be clearly defined and needs to be measurable, but the HOW must be the result of observable behaviors.

The regular revisions of expectations and objectives should not be left to chance. We should dedicate time in our agenda to this activity in our one on one weekly meeting. If our role is to provide direction, then we will give balanced feedback (80% positive and 20% to re-direct). If as a leader I am not able to observe at least one weekly opportunity on how my team is contributing to the overall results, then I have more problems than the lack of clear expectations. When acting as a peer or direct report, my meetings are an opportunity to look for feedback, influence and re-negotiate.

Finally, and this is the part we normally minimize: How am I going to recognize my staff member when he/she meets my expectations, and what are the consequences for not doing it?

To redefine and increase our mutual expectations is a regular exercise that allows us to grow and improve results. As with all skill, it requires practice, feedback and perseverance.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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