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## Great Expectations: The Boss - Direct Report Tango

What should a leader expect from a direct report, and what can the latter expect from the leader in return?

When both parties have clear expectations, the relationship is smooth like a tango. If one person gets out of step, however, the ensuing relationship makes for discord.

While much has been written about what makes a great leader, there is little discussion about the relationship dynamics between a leader and a direct report — until now, that is. Larry Bossidy, former CEO of Allied Signal and coauthor of *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* (Crown Business, 2002), recently proposed a compact between boss and subordinate.

Bossidy outlines his preferred set of expectations in a Harvard Business Review article, "What Your Leader Expects of You, And What You Should Expect in Return" (April 2007).

These expectations form the basis of the relationship and can be used to measure performance behaviors for appraisal reviews. Even though a direct report's expectations for the boss may have less leverage, setting clear expectations facilitates their relationship.

A set of expectations can and should work both ways. Certain behaviors on the part of both leader and direct report are crucial to performance, as well as forming rewarding relationships. Setting clear expectations keeps people focused on what really matters and helps guide them when things get off track.

Here's a summary of Bossidy's nine expectations for leaders. A direct report is expected to:

- ▶ 1. Get involved
- ▶ 2. Generate ideas
- ▶ 3. Be willing to collaborate
- ▶ 4. Be willing to lead initiatives
- ▶ 5. Develop leaders as he or she develops
- ▶ 6. Stay current
- ▶ 7. Anticipate
- ▶ 8. Drive his or her own growth
- ▶ 9. Be a player for all seasons



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## Get Involved

Knowing when to get involved and when to leave a team alone is crucial to good management. Effective executives know how to delegate, but they also recognize when a situation calls for their immediate involvement.

Direct reports should take the blame when things go wrong and give credit to their employees for positive developments. They must also have the courage to deliver bad news.

Good managers should step in under three circumstances:

- ▶ 1. When someone falls behind in his or her commitments
- ▶ 2. When important personnel matters arise (i.e., conflict)
- ▶ 3. When there's a crisis

## Generate Ideas

Idea people are not usually applauded in organizations. They're often regarded as unusual or renegades. The best ideas sound a bit crazy at first. Given the lack of fresh ideas in most corporations, a person who is innovative and creative should be respected and encouraged.

More mainstream executives can have good ideas, but they are often reluctant to speak up. When bosses expect and count upon their valued people to generate ideas, they set the stage for creative thinking. Leaders must provide the push for, and be receptive to, off-the-wall ideas. Often, the most innovative concepts never even reach the boss because they're dismissed as too unusual.

## Be Willing to Collaborate

The boss must expect collaboration among reports and be firm when there's resistance. Even though everyone knows how much more can be achieved when there is openness and transparency, reluctance to share credit or resources is common. This is often due to short-term thinking. The boss must make it clear that lack of cooperation won't be tolerated. Interpersonal difficulties must be resolved for the good of the organization.

## Be Willing to Lead Initiatives

People are often unwilling to step up to the plate to lead challenging, unproven initiatives. There's sometimes no way of knowing how a project will turn out. The boss should expect people to take risks and assume leadership roles, even when personal success is uncertain.

## Develop Leaders as He or She Develops

The boss can expect direct reports to take as much interest in subordinates' development as they do in their own. Direct reports should go out of their way to praise or criticize their people, when needed.

They can demonstrate this by becoming personally involved in giving performance appraisals, providing employees with specific, useful feedback.

## Stay Current

Bosses should expect their people to be informed of current events and news, particularly legislation and world affairs that directly or indirectly impact the organization.

Leaders expect their people to know what's going on with competitors and customers. Direct reports should know when things are going well with clients — not just when crises occur.

## Anticipate

Failure to anticipate setbacks is one consequence of not staying current. Looking at worst-case scenarios and being prepared are part of an effective executive's job. The boss should expect direct reports to anticipate crises, as well as spectacular successes. Lack of preparation in either case can be disastrous.

## Drive His or Her Own Growth

The boss should expect his people to continually learn and educate themselves. Direct reports should get involved with new people and ideas, while seeking out mentors and accepting demanding assignments. They should attend leadership development programs and/or engage the services of an executive coach.

## Be a Player for All Seasons

The boss should expect positive behaviors even during hard times. In a downturn, a direct report should continue to motivate and inspire. On the flip side, when projects are successful, he or she should take advantage of the upswing.

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## *What a Direct Report Should Expect from the Boss*

There are, of course, two sides to expectation agreements, and leaders know their subordinates will do their jobs more effectively when they can expect a few things in return. The boss should:

- ▶ 1. Provide clarity of direction
- ▶ 2. Set goals and objectives
- ▶ 3. Give frequent, specific and immediate feedback
- ▶ 4. Be decisive and timely
- ▶ 5. Be accessible
- ▶ 6. Demonstrate honesty and candor
- ▶ 7. Offer an equitable compensation plan

### Provide Clarity of Direction

It is the boss' job to communicate where the business is going, the "why" and the benefits of strategies. This requires at least quarterly financial results and progress reports for operational or strategic initiatives. People need to know why their goals are important and how they contribute to the bigger picture.

### Set Goals and Objectives

In addition to team goals, each report should know his or her individual goals to determine where to invest precious time. Reports must also understand where and how they will be measured, which takes the mystery out of promotions and bonus decisions. A boss should always be able to explain how and why promotions and bonuses were awarded.

### Give Frequent, Specific and Immediate Feedback

Direct reports shouldn't have to wait for annual reviews. They should expect the boss to deliver feedback when it is most relevant, and it should be specific to the situation. The more frequent, the better. This applies to positive feedback, as well; it should note how a specific behavior was particularly effective.

### Be Decisive and Timely

People should expect the boss to make decisions as soon as all of the necessary information is available. They should also feel comfortable enough to ask for help with decisions — and sooner, rather than later. Many direct reports believe they should be able to handle matters without bothering the leader, only to find that some crises could have been avoided with earlier involvement.

### *Demonstrate Honesty and Candor*

Bossidy believes people waste far too much time figuring out how to tell others something unpleasant. This is rampant during performance appraisals. Bosses use avoidance language instead of being direct and specific.

Bossidy offers the following examples of vague versus specific communication:

Vague	Specific
Hard worker	Results-oriented
Attentive	Anticipatory
Detail-oriented	Analytic problem solver
Good listener	Great communicator
Watches over his people	Holds people accountable
Amiable	Team player

Masking the truth isn't helpful when trying to develop people.

### Be Accessible

If bosses expect people to keep them informed, they should be easily accessible when needed. Direct reports should know they can approach the boss without fear if they happen to have bad news. Most CEOs are used to receiving bad news and should be counted on to be receptive and helpful.

### Offer an Equitable Compensation Plan

If bosses have set clear goals and objectives, they should be able to estimate bonus amounts at the end of each year. People want to be fairly compensated in a way that reflects their contributions. They want to understand how the compensation plan works, and they should expect the boss to be clear about it.

### *Keeping Bureaucracy at Bay*

Bureaucracy is a fact of organizational life, and all executives and leaders should strive to keep it to a minimum. You can tell when it overruns the organization: Decisions stall, and feedback is meaningless.

Maintaining clear expectations clarifies which behaviors are most important in spite of red tape. Expectations help minimize the effects of organizational mire. At several points during the day, direct reports can ask themselves, "What's expected of me right here, right now?" And the boss can also ask, "What can my direct report expect of me in return?"

It's much easier for people to live up to the CEO's expectations when he or she fulfills his/her end of the compact. When the boss fails to meet expectations, it's still wise for direct reports to meet the company's goals. They will become better employees and managers, will likely achieve promotions easily, and will contribute to the team's and company's smooth performance. Moreover, they will accelerate their personal development.



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## *More Lessons from Bad Leadership*

Wayne Hochwarter, an associate professor at Florida State University, teamed with his graduate students to interview more than 700 people about their relationships with their leaders. The researchers identified poor leadership practices likely to cause employee turnover. The most prevalent include:

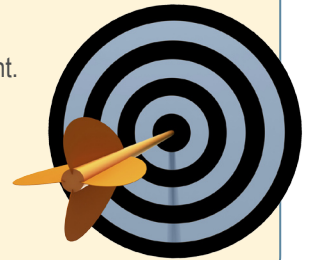
- ▶ 39% of those interviewed said their leaders fail to keep their promises.
- ▶ 37% of those interviewed said their leaders failed to give credit where it was due.
- ▶ 31% of those interviewed said their leaders had given them the “silent treatment” within the past year.
- ▶ 27% of those interviewed said their leaders made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- ▶ 24% of those interviewed said their leaders had invaded their privacy.
- ▶ 23% of those interviewed said their leaders had blamed others for their (the leaders’) mistakes.

(Source: <http://www.fsu.com/pages/2006/12/04/BigBadBoss.html>)

## *Expectations from Direct Reports*

This study suggests several additional expectations from direct reports:

- ▶ 1. Leaders should keep their promises and do what they say they’ll do.
- ▶ 2. Leaders should always give credit to others when due.
- ▶ 3. Leaders should respond with “yes,” “no,” “maybe” or even the rare “I don’t know,” rather than remain silent.
- ▶ 4. Leaders should be counted upon to address negative issues directly with those involved.
- ▶ 5. Leaders should respect their people’s privacy.
- ▶ 6. Leaders should always own up to their mistakes and never shift the blame to their reports.



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