



The Right to Management Competence

10:30 AM Wednesday April 27, 2011 | [Comments \(17\)](#)

Imagine that you're conducting a performance appraisal (<http://hbr.org/product/performance-appraisal/an/12352-PDF-ENG?Ntt=performance%2520appraisal>) with one of your people. You're discussing a major project that didn't turn out as hoped and you've just asked him why.

"Why did it fail (<http://hbr.org/archive-toc/BR1104>)?" he says. "Lots of reasons, but mostly because we didn't get what we needed from you. We were depending on other groups, but they couldn't have cared less. In fact, they didn't even know what we were doing and how it would help them. Plus, we never had a real strategy or plan and so we pretty much winged it every day, and every day you seemed to change your mind about what was important. In fact, Jack (your boss) never understood the project. So when people asked him, he couldn't support us."

What would your reaction be? We suspect a part of you would be thinking: "He can't say this. This is insubordination. I'm evaluating him. This isn't how it works."

And you'd be right. This isn't how it usually works. In virtually all organizations we know, the right to have formal expectations of others flows only downward, just like formal authority.

Notice we said "the *right* to have expectations." People certainly have expectations of those above them in the hierarchy, but there's little if any recognition of those expectations. Certainly there's no recognition of the right to have them.

We suggest that point of view should be questioned. We certainly don't think every expectation people have of a boss is appropriate. Many are naive, self-serving, and dysfunctional for the group. But there is one right we believe needs recognition by bosses, organizations, and all the people in them:

People have a right to competent management.

This is not a new idea. Even in Roman times it was said that every soldier had a right to competent command (http://books.google.com/books?id=YzbDcrHo0LMC&pg=PA96&lpg=PA96&dq=Roman+right+to+competent+command&source=bl&ots=5hKhrHGsq&sig=q81og6GYI2kpLIIWEvMmdPqPeCs&hl=en&ei=BB-4TeTcFZGEgewhaXeBA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CC0Q6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q&f=false). In the same way, your people can and should expect you to be an able boss. They should expect this in the same way and for the same reason they can expect to receive the minimal tools and resources needed to do the work assigned to them. And they should be allowed to discuss these expectations with you, their boss, just as you and they discuss your expectations of them.

"That's fine, in theory," you're probably thinking. "But who knows what 'competent' management is? Look at the millions of words written about the subject."

Certainly there's room for ongoing negotiation, especially around how the requirements of good management apply in a given situation. But that's little different from your own expectations of your people. You know the general elements of what's required of each; how those elements apply to specifics is open to ongoing discussion.

What good management comprises — what bosses do to make their people productive — isn't really a mystery. We can argue about the exact wording, but the basic elements aren't in doubt. We've summarized them in what we call the "3 Imperatives" (<http://hbr.org/product/being-the-boss-the-3-imperatives-for-becoming-a-gr/an/12285-HBK-ENG?Ntt=3%2520imperatives>): Manage yourself, manage your network, manage your team. In writing about these elements, we've described them in terms of what good managers do and what all managers should strive to do. But it's not hard to rephrase them from a direct report's point of view — in effect, a "Direct Reports' Bill of Rights" — as follows.

Every direct report should be able to expect that the boss will:

- *Be Trustworthy.* Trust is based on competence and character, and so people can expect the boss (a) will know what to do and how to do it, and (b) will possess fundamental values, standards, interpersonal skills, emotional maturity, and levels of caring that support the work and those doing it.
- *Exercise influence beyond his or her group.* Every group works in a web of interdependence within a broader organization and beyond. Success — through, for example, securing needed resources, attention, and cooperation — depends on the boss's ability to exercise influence in that broader context through a network of ongoing, mutually supportive relationships.
- *Create a team of his or her group.* A group is a collection of people who work together. A team is a group whose members are mutually committed to pursuit of a clear purpose and the achievement of goals based on that purpose. In a team there is a "we" separate from the individuals involved and the people in that "we" believe they will all succeed or fail together. Why is this important? Because members of a team are more engaged and committed and as a group are more innovative and productive. A competent manager knows how to transform a group into a team (<http://hbr.org/product/be-clear-about-how-your-team-works-foster-the-righ/an/7323BC-PDF-ENG?Ntt=team%2520culture>) — by fostering a compelling purpose, worthwhile goals and clear plans, productive work processes, and a culture of "we."
- *Recognize individuals and support their development.* People want to belong and be recognized for themselves. Thus, an effective manager knows individual team members, works with them, supports their development, and recognizes their contributions — all within the context of the team.

How would you fare in the eyes of your people if they applied these standards? What if your organization told everyone that this is what all employees should expect of their managers? What if, in your performance reviews with your people, you discussed with them your own performance in terms of the expectations above?