



How to Set Expectations with Young Talent

by Chris Resto

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When I received my first project assignment as a new hire at Gemini Consulting (now Capgemini), I was quite unhappy. My peers were assigned to the high-profile financial services and telecommunications industries, whereas I was “stuck” with a client in publishing.

“How boring,” I thought. “How will this benefit my career?”

The challenge my attitude and expectations posed to my manager back then is familiar to anyone who manages young talent. Although recent grads do want to contribute to the organization, they also want to make sure they are developing their skills and building their career paths right from the start. If they don’t believe there’s something in it for them, their performance may show it.

The good news: A little care and education go a long way when a young employee makes snap judgments about an assignment, as I did, based on limited and superficial information. How my manager approached me is a model for other managers to follow:

- He detailed the learning opportunities the project offered
- He adjusted my learning goals so that they included skills I didn’t even know I needed

IDENTIFY WHAT THE PROJECT WILL TEACH

As you would expect, my manager told me at the beginning of our project what his expectations were. But when I thought the meeting was over, he said, “Now, Chris, what are your expectations? What do you want to learn?” I was stunned—pleasantly so.

I told him I worried that this project in publishing wouldn’t be as challenging as one in banking or telecom. He smiled, sensing that it was simply a matter of which industries seemed more glamorous to me on the surface. So he walked me through the specific tasks and responsibilities the project. It turned out that it was quite complex, involving a parent company’s six business units in different locations. Completing the project would require navigating multiple complex culture conflicts in addition to making the data-driven business case for changing processes.

By spelling out the specific challenges offered by the publishing project, my manager allowed me to see that it would give me ample opportunity to develop new skills and build my resume.

THIS ARTICLE TALKS ABOUT:

- Engaging young talent by taking an interest in their career paths
- Helping them see the learning opportunities offered by a project or role
- Adjusting their expectations and learning goals

ADJUST NEW HIRES’ EXPECTATIONS AND LEARNING GOALS

My manager then asked me what I wanted to learn. In response to my answer, he replied, “Your expectations are too low. Here, I’ll help you think of some more because we want to make sure you get more out of this project.” It was then that I realized I was so naive and didn’t know what I didn’t know—in itself a highly valuable lesson.

He added these learning goals to the ones I had enumerated:

- Learn how to organize a large meeting
- Learn how to facilitate a large meeting
- Learn how to present to a group of people who won’t initially be open to your message

His thoroughness in describing the additional skills I could gain from the assignment sent me the strong message that he cared about my career.

Since I have been running the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Undergraduate Practice Opportunities Program (UPOP), a professional development and internship program for sophomores, I have seen other great managers adjust their new hires’ expectations and learning goals successfully. One manager at Johnson & Johnson is among the best.

At the beginning of projects, he asks interns to write down their expectations and goals for the projects and for him as a manager. He asks them to list the skills they want to develop and anything they learned in school that they hope to apply. Then the manager does the same exercise separately. Finally, the manager and intern compare their results and work on compromises to expectations that don’t overlap.

Year after year, this manager's interns leave J&J saying it was an incredible experience. And the manager claims that his interns add tremendous value to his group.

When setting expectations with young talent, ask for their input and spell out how their work will enhance their development and build their resumes. Your focus on their careers will make them feel more valued, and they will be motivated to create more value for your organization and for your clients. ♦

Chris Resto is the author of *Recruit or Die: How Any Business Can Beat the Big Guys in the War for Young Talent* (Portfolio, 2007) and the founding director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Undergraduate Practice Opportunities Program. He can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.

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