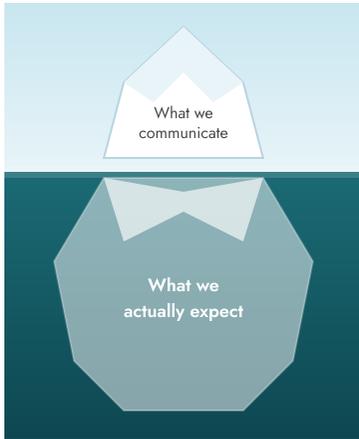# Setting CLEAR Expectations

A Manager's Guide to Communicating What "Good" Looks Like

Most performance problems aren't just about performance. They're often **clarity problems**—a gap between what you expected and what you communicated.

The Expectation Iceberg

The expectations we've articulated, to others and to ourselves, is the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface lies everything you assume is "obvious"—standards you've internalized so deeply you forget others don't share them.

When expectations go unmet, managers often think: *"I figured it was common sense!"* But "common sense" is far from universal—what we think of as "common sense" is shaped by our unique experiences and assumptions.

The Same Situation, Opposite Expectations

Two reasonable, well-intentioned managers can hold expectations that are not just different—they're literally opposites. Neither is wrong. Both make sense given each person's background. But when a manager holds one expectation and their employee assumes the other, frustration is inevitable.

"I expect you to ask for help early and often."	*"I expect you to try to work it out before coming to me."*
"I expect you to be bold and proactive."	*"I expect you to be cautious and careful."*

The solution isn't to have "better" expectations. It's to make your expectations explicit—visible above the waterline where your team can actually see them.

Your expectations feel obvious because they come from *you*—your history, your wiring, your worldview. Everyone on your team has a different combination of these five sources, which means their "obvious" looks different from yours.

Values	Innate Talents	Upbringing	Past Bosses	Biases

Values

What you believe matters most—efficiency, thoroughness, collaboration—shapes what you expect from others.

Innate Talents

Skills that come naturally to you can feel like baseline competencies. You may expect others to find them equally easy.

Upbringing

Family, culture, and early experiences teach us unspoken rules about respect, communication, and work ethic.

Past Bosses

The standards your previous managers held you to often become the standards you hold others to—for better or worse.

Biases

Unconscious assumptions about how people "should" behave based on their role, background, or identity can distort expectations in ways we don't see.

> **♀ The Insight**
>
> This is why "common sense" fails. What feels obvious to you is the product of *your* unique combination of these five factors. Your team members have their own—and their own version of obvious.

The Cost of Unclear Expectations

Your Employee

Works hard on the wrong things. Feels blindsided by feedback. Loses confidence.

You

Frustrated by "obvious" gaps. Spending time correcting avoidable mistakes.

Your Team

Inconsistent standards breed resentment. High performers disengage.

Not all expectations carry the same weight. Before communicating an expectation, get clear on what level it belongs to—and communicate that level explicitly.

1	**2**	**3**
Non-Negotiables	**Standards**	**Preferences**
Mission-Critical	*Performance Expectations*	*Nice-to-Haves*
Examples:	**Examples:**	**Examples:**
Safety protocols	Quality benchmarks	Communication style
Ethical standards	Response times	Approach or method
Legal compliance	Deadlines	Format choices
Core values	Communication norms	Working hours

How the Levels Work

Non-negotiables are bright lines. Crossing them has serious consequences—up to and including termination. These should be few, clear, and consistently enforced.

Standards define what "good" looks like. Missing them warrants coaching and course correction. These form the bulk of day-to-day expectations.

Preferences are your personal style. Employees can deviate without consequence—as long as standards are met.

> ⚠ **Common Mistake**
>
> New managers often treat preferences like non-negotiables. When someone doesn't format a report "the right way," ask: *Is this actually a standard, or is it just my preference?*

Communicating the Level

Be explicit about which level you're operating at:

Unclear

"I'd like you to use our CRM system to track all client interactions."

Clear

*"Using CRM to track interactions is a **standard**—not optional. It's how we maintain data integrity. Missing entries will come up in our check-ins."*

> **Calibration Questions**
>
> Before setting an expectation: *What happens if it isn't met?* (Determines level) • *Have I communicated the consequences?* (Ensures alignment) • *Am I holding everyone to this standard?* (Checks fairness)

Use this framework whenever you communicate an expectation—in onboarding, a project kickoff, or a performance conversation. Each element addresses a different dimension of clarity.

C — ### Context

Why this expectation matters. Connect it to the bigger picture—the team's goals, the company's mission, or the impact on others.

Ask: "If someone asked 'why does this matter?'—what would I say?"

L — ### Level

What "good" looks like—the specific standard you're holding. Be concrete about quality, timing, and scope.

Ask: "How would I know if this expectation was met? What would I observe?"

E — ### Examples

Concrete illustrations of meeting—and not meeting—the expectation. Examples make abstract standards tangible.

Ask: "Can I give a 'this, not that' example to make the standard unmistakable?"

A — ### Accountability

How you'll track progress and when you'll check in. Define the feedback loop so there are no surprises.

Ask: "When and how will we revisit this? What does the check-in cadence look like?"

R — ### Resources

What support, tools, training, or access the person needs to meet the expectation. Don't set people up to fail.

Ask: "What would make this easier? What barriers might get in the way?"

> **The sequence matters.** Start with Context (the "why") before jumping to Level (the "what"). People are far more likely to meet expectations they understand and believe in.

See how a vague expectation transforms when you apply each CLEAR element.

| Before: Vague | After: CLEAR |

Before: Vague

> *"Keep me in the loop on your projects."*

Why We Default to Vague

Vague expectations feel efficient. They're quick to say and seem flexible. But they leave critical questions unanswered:

- How often should I update you?
- What level of detail do you want?
- Through what channel?
- What counts as "in the loop"?

Your employee will fill in these blanks based on *their* assumptions—which may not match yours. Then both of you feel frustrated.

After: CLEAR

CONTEXT

"When I'm surprised by project status in leadership meetings, it makes it hard for me to advocate for our team's resources."

LEVEL

"Weekly status update every Friday by 3pm, plus immediate notification of any blockers or scope changes."

EXAMPLES

"A good update: 'On track for Tuesday. Waiting on legal—will escalate Monday if no response.' A blocker alert is a same-day Slack message."

ACCOUNTABILITY

"I'll confirm receipt. We'll discuss status in our 1:1s. If I'm not getting what I need, I'll tell you directly."

RESOURCES

"I've shared a template. If you're unsure whether to flag something, err on the side of telling me."

⚑ **Signs Your Expectation Isn't Clear Enough**

You've used words like "appropriate," "reasonable," or "timely" without defining them • You can't explain how you'd know if it was met • Different team members would interpret it differently • You haven't explained why it matters • You haven't discussed how you'll follow up

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⚑ **Close the Loop**

After communicating an expectation, ask: **"What questions do you have?"** This works better than "Does that make sense?"—which invites a reflexive "yes."

Use this worksheet to prepare before communicating an important expectation. Write out each element, then share it with your team member.

The Expectation (stated simply):

_____

C **Context**

Why does this matter? How does it connect to team or company goals?

L **Level**

What does "good" look like? Be specific about quality, timing, and scope.

E **Examples**

What's a concrete "this, not that" illustration of meeting the standard?

A **Accountability**

How will you track progress? When will you check in?

R **Resources**

What support, tools, or training does this person need to succeed?

After sharing, ask: "What questions do you have?"