

Seven Suggestions for Setting expectations for other people

Setting goals and expectations for people in academia is inherently difficult, particularly in research. Research worth doing has unknown outcomes so it can be difficult to know whether someone is struggling because the work is very complex or because they don't have the competence required to tackle it. Goals and targets are difficult to establish and require a more subtle approach than the kind of SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) targets that are helpful in other kinds of work. This places importance on getting to know the people working with you and opening up honest conversational lines so that you know when people are struggling. The annual [staff review process](#) is useful for setting expectations but it shouldn't be the only time you are discussing them.

1 Understand who you are managing

Who is it that you are asking to do this work? Get to know this unique person, their work patterns, interests and passions. What do they find exciting, energising, draining or worrying? What are their own ambitions and goals for life and work and where is the synergy with the expectations you are setting? How can you create compatibility here?

2 Break things down

You expect to see a paper completed by Christmas. When would you like to see the literature review? The first draft? The final draft? Breaking tasks down makes it easier to specify particular expectations for different parts of the work. Negotiate goals with the other person by being explicit about what you expect and asking whether they think this is reasonable from their perspective. Encourage honesty; the other person has a vantage point that you don't and can factor in competing priorities, energy levels and ability. It's better to agree realistic expectations early on than to fail to deliver later when it will cause both of you more problems.

3 Remove barriers

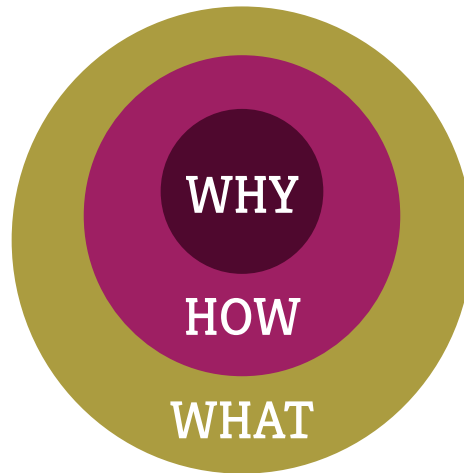
Imagine you were doing this work. What would get in your way? Smooth the path with uncooperative colleagues, open doors with introductory emails, get resources ordered. Let the person know that you believe they can do the work. Relieve them of extraneous tasks. Give them a quiet space to work in or a network to go to. Buddy them up with a peer, a mentor or a colleague who can help them along the way.

4 Create pace

Create a sense of momentum with a series of deadlines and milestones. People work best under different degrees of time pressure so talk to the person about how best to keep the momentum going. Some people will need variety in their activities to maintain energy, others work best through total immersion in a single task. Meet at regular intervals to discuss how things are going and demonstrate genuine interest in the person and their work.

5 Start with why

Author [Simon Sinek](#) describes how inspirational leaders start with why in their communication, beginning by talking about why something is important or exciting before going on to explain how it works and what they do.



This is the exact opposite of normal communication patterns where we focus on what we do, followed by how and then, if we are lucky, give a reason why. When it comes to motivation, people are far more engaged by why they are doing something than what they are doing. So when you are setting expectations for the work of others try starting with why this work is so exciting and important before going on to explain how to approach it and finally what to do.

6 Be a radiator not a drain

After an hour with some people you leave feeling energised and invigorated. An hour with others leaves you flat and exhausted. Richard Reeves, author of *The 80 Minute MBA*, describes these two types of people as ‘radiators’ and ‘drains’. When you are setting expectations and motivating people to achieve them make sure that you are radiating energy and not draining it. Think of the radiators in your life and what they have in common – they are optimistic, solution focused, affirming, authentic, enthused, curious and inspired. Are you?

7 Review your expectations

How reasonable are your expectations of other people? Be mindful of how high your expectations are for yourself – do you expect others to work long hours because you do? Do you expect someone to make the same sacrifices that you have? Try to separate what you need the person to do for the success of the project from what you want them to do for all sorts of other reasons. If someone is delivering everything you need yet you still find yourself irritated then ask yourself why.

“One may miss the mark by aiming too high as well as too low.” Thomas Fuller