LEADERSHIP
in a New World
Managing expectations post pandemic

BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

As much as I would like to not admit it, the world has changed since early 2020. During COVID-19, people looked forward to "getting back to normal" after the pandemic ended, perhaps naively so. The cold, hard truth is that the world is different now. The Great Resignation precipitated by the pandemic has caused a shortage of workers, including professionals in the right of way industry. The work in our industry is abundant, but fewer professionals are available to do the work, or they leap from one firm to another in pursuit of a higher salary or better company conditions. The person with whom you started working with initially on a part of a project may not be the same person who remains on the project. My firm was part of a project team that included an environmental consulting company, and during the tenure of the project, four different environmental engineers were assigned to the project due to departures from the company.

Another post-COVID-19 consequence is the effect on the supply chain, which has impacted the ability to both effectively plan and execute public improvement projects. If access to a needed project material or materials is hindered, then the project could be suspended, sometimes to an undetermined time if the project funding is jeopardized.

Reliance on technology has also immensely increased. Professionals continue to work remotely both full and part time, and communications are predominantly via email or sometimes text, which leads to less frequent and more challenging discussion. It seems no one talks telephonically anymore. As a result, the communicative discourse is a protracted process or only a portion of the information needed and requested is provided. Too many times, it seems that I have sent an email message with a few questions, and only one is answered. The rest of the message is completely ignored.

Additionally, the increased dependence on technology has altered how we assemble. Although fortunately, some meetings and conferences have returned to being in person, many are still being conducted via Zoom or other virtual platforms. The lack of in-person interaction has led to some, including our team members, "[to have] deepening feelings of loneliness and disconnection," as Dr. Lauren Munsch, M.D. observed in an April 2023 survey on anthropedia.org that asked experts about the biggest challenge to well-being.

Despite recent restricted resources and time, it seems that clients and other project partners are imposing higher expectations than ever. The result is that team leaders and members alike feel frustrated, stressed and overwhelmed. Many in our industry are high achievers and rely upon prior successes as the benchmark for current assignment completion and project delivery. But to do so is unrealistic because completion and delivery cannot be accomplished in the same manner or timeline as in the past.

Managing Expectations is Essential for Effective Leadership

Managing expectations in any relationship, professional or personal, is essential. Differing expectations in a relationship are almost always a source of misunderstanding and conflict. The television talk show host Sally Jessy Raphael once said, "When two people are in a relationship, and one thinks there is a problem, and the other doesn't, there's still a problem."

Today, as an industry leader with limited resources, managing expectations with clients, other project partners and your firm's team is more important than ever. If one effectively manages expectations, it avoids frustration, negativity and conflict. As Janine Popick noted in the Inc.com blog article "Managing Expectations: The Most Underrated Leadership Skill," "Not everyone does it, but maybe if more did, we could avoid a lot of the day-to-day drama that goes on in every office."

Honest Assessment and Communication are Key

The first step in managing expectations is to clearly understand the assignment or project and what it entails. The second step is to assess honestly your firm's capabilities to successfully complete the project or assignment. Depending upon the type of assignment or project and your firm's capabilities, you may evaluate your company's abilities by asking the following questions: What talent does your team have available to accept the assignment or project? What are your individual team member's strengths and weaknesses? What combination of professional and administrative team members need to be part of the assignment or project, and historically how have they worked together? What reliance will there be on other project partners or third parties for the assignment or project? To what other assignments or projects is your company currently committed? What is a realistic period for your team to competently complete the assignment or project?

When deciding deadlines, it is imperative to include input and commitment from the team members who will be on the assignment or project. That said, a candid assessment must be made. My experience has been that enthusiastic team members can overestimate their abilities and underestimate the time to complete the tasks needed for the assignment or project. Team leaders must use their experience to decide what is attainable.

A principal component in managing expectations is consistent and constant communication — at all levels. Leaders should communicate with their clients, partners, team members and necessary third parties. The communication should include follow-up on the status of meeting current and anticipated deadlines and other assignment and project progress through a proven and regular tracking process. If a roadblock is encountered, it should be addressed directly and promptly. No one likes surprises, and as former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said, "Bad news isn't wine. It doesn't improve with age." Likewise, assignment or project successes should also be shared.

Finally, prioritizing assignment or project tasks for your team members is critical. Some team members are not as capable of prioritizing tasks, or alternatively, they focus first on the more appealing tasks and avoid the more challenging ones. It is human nature for individuals to tackle a job that they enjoy or about which they feel competent and put off the more arduous ones.

Incorporate Buffers and Downtime

My first position after I graduated from college was as personnel and property manager for a national employment agency. I reported directly to the company president and founder, a larger-than-life and intimidating personality who resembled legendary college basketball coach Bobby Knight. Despite his imposing presence, he was a sage mentor who provided me with some of the best advice about managing expectations that I have applied and shared with others. "When you go out with your co-workers after work, tell your husband that you'll be home later than you think you will. That way, you'll have extra time and won't be running late. If you come home early, he'll think you did so because you want to see him." The lesson that I learned is that, not only is it important to be honest about what can be accomplished and in what timeframe, but buffers and downtime must be considered and incorporated into the assessment.

Two reasons exist for including buffers and downtime. First, it is psychologically exhausting to address assignment or project components back-to-back. One principle in yoga is that a successful flow in life involves a period of activity followed by a period of rest. Team members cannot perform optimally if they are not provided with some down or buffer time.

The second reason is that things happen, professionally and personally. Pertinent information needed for an assignment or project cannot be obtained as expeditiously as planned.

Necessary approvals are delayed. A key team member has a personal crisis, which may require another team member to step in or otherwise hinders the anticipated conclusion.

If ultimately the down or buffer time prove to be unnecessary because the assignment or project progresses smoothly, all the better. Your firm can deliver the assignment or project early, which will be well received by the client. It is like the advice that my former boss provided about arriving home early.

Avoid Pressure to Commit to Unrealistic Requests

One cautionary note is that, while it is tempting to agree to client and other stakeholder-driven deadlines and other requests, it can be unreasonable to do so. If you do agree under such circumstances, the result can create havoc. It is better to be realistic and clearly communicate your firm's ability to handle an assignment or project before accepting the assignment or project than to concur with a client or project stakeholder's request that may be unattainable.

An obvious concern is that if you do not agree to the client or other stakeholder's deadlines or other needs, it will be perceived as if you are pushing back, and your company may lose the assignment or project altogether. But, as Popick wisely said, "Being open about what can be delivered and what the plan is to bring in the rest can go a long way in instilling confidence and getting the go-ahead. If you can nail the fine art of pushback, you've won half the battle of managing expectations successfully." Even if your firm loses the assignment or project altogether, its integrity will be maintained. The failure to deliver as promised will be disappointing to the client and other project stakeholders and potentially damage your firm's reputation, which could have a long-lasting effect on future business.

Abandon Perfection

As a leader in this post-COVID-19 world, you need to abandon perfection, which does not mean that your team's contribution to the assignment or project should not be exemplary. Abandoning perfection means that you should not hold your team and yourself to impossible standards. The world is imperfect, and it always has been. Ultimately, you and your team can only be expected to perform your best with what you have been provided under the given circumstances. ✪

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