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Owning the Problem

Employees who “exceed expectations” are often the ones who take the initiative and get the job done—despite roadblocks.

Alan Eli Willner

One of the hardest transitions from the classroom to the workplace involves how people keep score. Students accustomed to easy-to-understand test scores or grades—A, B, C—are suddenly confronted with mysterious employee rankings, such as “exceeds expectations,” “meets expectations,” and “needs improvement to meet expectations.” When I first saw these words, I had no clue what “expectations” really meant.

One way to understand the expectations, of course, is through regular discussions with your manager, to

set a baseline. But we all like “getting A’s”—how does one actually *exceed* those expectations? One answer, perhaps, is by “taking ownership.”

“Doing your best” is often not enough

It is heartbreaking when a young person works 24/7 but fails to produce. What happened? Often it is because the person did not identify risks early on and ask the manager or colleagues for help. A mantra could be to “get it done or get help to get it done.”

In the movie “The Rock,” the character John Mason (played by Sean Connery) says that “Losers always whine about [doing] their best.” That is a very harsh statement, but there is some truth to it. Phrases like “I did my best” and “It’s not my fault” have a problem: They focus on the person, rather than on the result—which is often the manager’s top concern.

I know this from experience. Decades ago, I submitted a proposal that was important to me to a Washington, DC-based funding agency. I “did my best” to create a proposal and ship it using an overnight courier’s guaranteed service, ensuring that it would arrive before the deadline on the following day. Job done.

Not quite. As I learned from the news the following morning, a snowstorm had hit the middle of the country. Worried about a possible delay in my proposal shipment, I called the courier—who said that the package would indeed be delayed by a day due to weather. I pleaded with them to find a way to deliver it before the deadline. They said it couldn’t be done—but that they would be happy to refund the \$20 shipment fee, since their service was “guaranteed.”

I called the funding agency and explained what happened. The person I spoke with was very sympathetic, saying she understood how unusual it was. But she also made it clear that the deadline would stand, and that I could re-apply next year.

At that point it hit me: I owned this problem—that is, whether it was my “fault” or not, any adverse consequences of not getting the proposal funded would directly affect me. What could I do? Instead of



A.E. Willner

Courtesy of A.E. Willner

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feeling helpless, I focused on finding a different way forward. I called a friend in the Washington area, emailed him the proposal using a dial-up modem, and asked him to print it out and hand-deliver it to the agency. End of story—I got the funding and am eternally grateful to my friend.

Taking ownership

In the working world, your manager will assign you a task. There is a huge difference, though, between “being responsible” for the task and “owning” the task. For example, suppose a deadline is approaching and a critical piece of lab equipment

breaks. A responsible person will work hard to figure out the problem and call all the possible vendors to get the item replaced—and, perhaps, be frustrated that the equipment will arrive after the deadline. A person who owns the task’s consequences might call vendors, colleagues or anyone and ask to borrow, rent or buy the equipment—and even get on a plane to pick it up.

Or suppose you have a job interview, and you find that your car has a flat tire. You can call up the interviewer and explain you can’t make it due to a flat tire—and the interviewer, while sympathetic, may not be able to reschedule your appointment. Or you can find a way, any possible way, to get to that interview. If you “own” the problem and the consequences, the answer is clear.

When challenges arise, exceed expectations

I believe that such a can-do attitude—doing whatever it takes to overcome challenges—is a key element in exceeding expectations at work. A few years ago, I needed significant assistance in putting together one of the most important proposals of my career. I asked for critical help from several of my wonderful Ph.D. students—because I felt that they would care about the proposal as if it were their own.

Near the end, we reviewed the final proposal multiple times as a group and then decided to wrap it up. A few minutes after I submitted the proposal online, I received a frantic phone call from a student, telling me they continued reviewing, found a typo and wanted to see if I could correct it before pushing “submit.” The typo didn’t end up mattering—but their devotion

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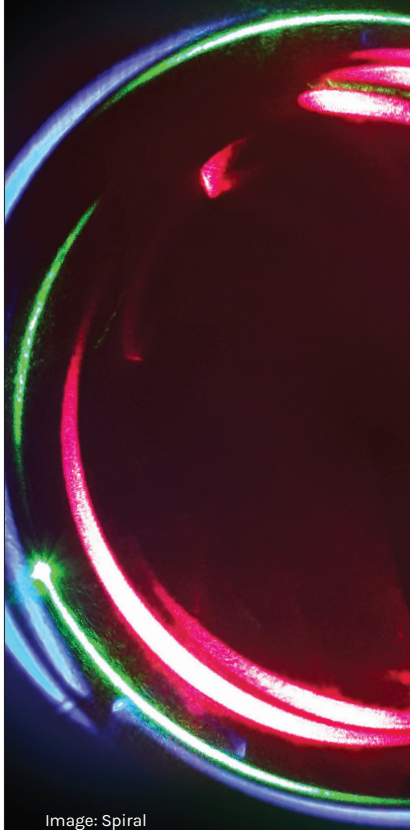


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to the task at hand did. Because of their work ethic and attitude, I felt extremely comfortable throughout the process. They were amazing, outstanding—and significantly exceeded my expectations.

On the other hand, a manager can feel quite rankled when an employee seems to care minimally about a project's outcome. Many people will do the job they are told but are not invested in the outcome. Often a manager can sense this—and, understandably, expects more.

Some parting thoughts

My experience suggests three other keys to exceeding expectations in a work environment—all, in some sense, related to the notion of taking ownership:

Don't waste the resources of others.

My father used to say that, as an employee, you should “spend the company's money as if it is your own.” This obviously has limits, but there is wisdom behind it. An employee who will spend hours comparing different personal smartwatches before buying one, yet extends little effort to compare different lab equipment before spending a significant amount of company money, is likely to come in below their supervisor's expectations. And the same holds for a host of other issues, such as time, effort and resources.



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Keeping one step ahead of your boss is infinitely better than being one step behind.

When problems arise, innovate solutions.

Brilliant, innovative solutions can be of enormous value. And taking ownership can grease innovation's wheels. If an employee truly feels ownership of a problem, and a personal necessity to solve it, their ability to uniquely innovate that solution dramatically increases.

Take the initiative.

Employees can wait to be asked to do something, or they can take the initiative and create an opportunity. Don't wait to be asked for a progress report—provide updates before being asked. Don't wait to be told a deadline is coming—ask your boss for input on the timeline. Keeping one step ahead of your boss is infinitely better than being one step behind.

My sincere hope is that by having a sense of ownership, young professionals coming into the workplace today will end up reading “exceeds expectations” on evaluations throughout their careers. **OPINION**

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