



The Powerful Question to Which We All Need an Answer

by Kevin Eikenberry

This question is said outloud often, but it is asked far more often in people's minds and under their breath. It is sometimes asked in an earnest tone, often it's uttered in a quizzical way, and far-too-often it's said in exasperation. Whenever it is asked it hints at a gap in communication and understanding and always highlights an opportunity for significant productivity improvement.

The lack of an answer stifles creativity, causes Customers to leave, damages relationships and promotes inactivity in indecisiveness..And these are just *some* of problems caused by this question, and a small hint of the value of answering it.

You've asked this question, likely in the last few days. And, unfortunately, it also has likely been asked of you more often (and more recently) than you realize.

If my writing so far has worked as intended, you are both wondering what the question is and hoping I get to the answer soon – which is a feeling that is similar to what we feel when we need an answer to the actual question itself. When you don't have an answer to this question you can be confused, frustrated, stymied and perhaps unduly stressed (and none of these emotions help you reach top performance).

“What do you expect?”

Let's explore just a few of the situations where this question gets asked. People ask, or think without asking, this question when:

- They really have no clue what is expected.
- The task is new, and they don't see the context of the request in the big picture of their work.
- What they were told didn't make sense (or was shared in a one-way medium like an email or text).
- They were seemingly given latitude, but in the past they've been burned by that not delivering what the person wanted.

The person sharing the task didn't really know their expectations either; they seem to be taking an “I'll know it when I see it” approach. I'm sure you can think of other common instances, but this short list highlights the problems that a lack of clarity on expectations can cause.

Now that we have identified the problem, let's look at what you can do to eliminate or at least minimize the number of times this question is asked.

- *Talk about the big picture.* Help people put your request, the task or their behavior into context. Once people see where you are headed mentally, or what the overall goal is, it will make your request much clearer. Help people see how this request fits into the larger picture of work or why this matters in achieving team or organizational goals.



The Powerful Question to Which We All Need an Answer (continued)

- *Share boundaries.* Perhaps you have some parts of the task that you want done in a specific way. If so, share those specific expectations. Beyond that though, let people know how big the playing field is. Let them know the budget, time parameters or whatever else matters in the situation, and give them clarity on where they have latitude as well as where they don't.
- *Be clear yourself.* Pretty hard to give people clear expectations if they aren't clear to you. Get clarity before the conversation or assignment. If not, you must let go of the outcome – or you are creating a very costly “gotcha” for people.
- *Share your clarity.* Once you are clear, communicate your expectations clearly. This point may seem obvious, but it is worth saying anyway. Be crystal clear in your communication about expectations.
- *Confirm understanding.* Like any other important communication, it is useful to make sure the other person understands. Take the time to clarify with them by having them paraphrase back to you or in some way confirm understanding.
- *Provide the needed skills.* Sometimes people aren't able to meet expectations because they don't have the necessary skills. When this is the case, provide them with the advice and skills needed so they can reach the expectations that have been laid out for them.
- *Make it part of every conversation.* To avoid even small gaps in expectations, make a conscious effort to talk about expectations regularly.
- *Let go.* Once you done these other steps, let go of the task. You have assigned it and given clear expectations. Now you need to allow people to succeed!

And finally, while this isn't required, *don't be overly prescriptive.* Giving people some room to work within your expectations will garner you greater commitment and better results. If not, the ultimate end of this logic is to tell people exactly what you want in such detail that they have no room for creativity, self expression, personal commitment or an opportunity to create something even better.

As you find this balance between “I want them to figure it out for themselves” and “this is exactly what I want” you develop a team with skills, confidence and people that are highly productive.

However, wherever you fall on this sliding scale, the question “what do you expect?” needs – and deserves – an answer.

Make it your personal challenge to eliminate the question of “what do you expect?”. Not because people are afraid to ask, but because conversations about expectations are encouraged, positive, open and ongoing.

Potential Pointer: Effective leaders know people need a crystal clear answer to the question “What do you expect?” if they want any chance at top performance. Do not underestimate the value of answering this question clearly in unlocking top performance and achievement.



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