

THE POWER OF EXPECTATIONS

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“If you don’t expect anything, you can’t be disappointed.”

What a cynical way to think! And how widespread it has become in our society.

If you doubt this, you have only to look at our political system, our schools, even many of our businesses to see its ill effects.

We liked President Clinton because he was optimistic. He smiled, despite his political challenges. He seemed relaxed even in the direst of circumstances. He appeared to shrug off his most virulent attackers. We were led to believe that if he was able to be congenial and happy, then what he had done must not be so bad.

That he lied under oath appears to be excusable according to polls of many Americans. People who object to this behavior are labeled extremist, partisan, and just plain mean. We don’t want people to be crabby; we want happiness and prosperity. With a strong economy, other expectations appeared to be diminished. How different things look today!

In the business world, we talk a lot about innovation and creativity and about empowering people to unleash their personal best. But we are uncertain about setting firm expectations for these things because creativity, diversity, and empowerment call forth a wide range of human potential. We hesitate to draw hard and fast lines, believing we’ll know the right stuff when we see it. Meanwhile, we waver on

performance expectations and we assess leniently in order to avoid potential attitude problems. We make close enough good enough and grudgingly dole out raises. We hope for the best from our empowered people.

Similarly, many educators today hesitate to give kids bad grades for fear of damaging frail self-esteem. They worry about instilling self-doubt and ruining kids' chances for future happiness. Better to gently encourage, they say, than to disappoint and disturb with cruel reality. We set minimal expectations and relax even those in the name of kindness and compassion. But failing to set expectations is not kind. And expecting little is not compassionate.

When we first learned how to walk, we had parents and friends eagerly holding out their arms, encouraging us to take those hesitant, faltering first steps. They thought it was cute when we fell down and they immediately encouraged us to stand up and try again. Energy and drama were a part of every attempt. We saw pride and excitement on adults' faces. They made a big fuss over the whole process. We were important and special at these moments and we loved the attention. Adults *expected* us to learn how to walk and we did. Not without struggle and sometimes not without pain, but we learned.

The same was true when we started to talk. We spewed gibberish right along with our peas for a time. Patiently, our "teachers" helped us understand sounds, form words, and learn the names of people and objects. We learned the right words, not just any old word. We learned how to be precise with our requests. When we wanted an apple, an orange wouldn't do. As we got older, we learned how to address our parents, our teachers, and each other with respect. (Well, we used to.)

Remember what it was like to learn how to write? The letters of the alphabet were strange hieroglyphics at first. We didn't understand when the line should be

straight and when it should curve. We didn't know why we were supposed to make big letters sometimes and little letters other times. Our teachers patiently showed us again and again how to do it right. They told us when we had made a mistake, and they told us how to correct it. Gradually we learned the alphabet. Then we learned how to put letters together to make words. We were taught to spell. We learned to read. With these came the opportunity to share thoughts, to learn from others, and to tell our own stories, little by little.

These early expectations are universal. All children are expected to walk and talk and learn, and participation in these efforts is directed by a variety of teachers. Our successes vary according to our abilities and efforts, of course, and according to our own expectations. This is as it should be. To "level the playing field" and to hold back corrections is to rob children of the ability and the joy of learning. And yes the challenge and work of it, too. With proper guidance, we learn that success does not come without struggle. A little later we realize, sometimes painfully so, that our early accomplishments do not guarantee future successes. Still, we forge ahead, encouraged by others to expect good things.

As we grow, we find our expectations coming from within and taking the place of those imposed upon us by adults. Appropriate expectations become more difficult to discern. We recognize diversity and we seek to respect differences while getting for ourselves the good things we desire. Life gets complex, success becomes increasingly difficult, and disappointment seems to follow so many of our efforts. We long for simplicity. We wish things were easier. We wonder how things that used to be so clear have suddenly become so vague. In our confusion, we find ourselves suspending expectations and simply taking life as it comes. But this doesn't make us happy.

Happiness, pride, and success. These are things we all want. But we cannot have them if we are unwilling to set expectations. We cannot have them if we are unwilling to work for as long as it takes to realize them. Patience and persistence, once honored and accepted values, have become old-fashioned oddities. We live in an age of virtual reality and microwave patience. If we can't have it now, we decide we don't want or need it and we move on to something more easily attainable.

This didn't happen suddenly. We have pardoned ourselves for little things since the beginning of time. But the little things are getting bigger. The training we once received in how to be polite, how to respect other people, how to earn things instead of stealing them, how to be good, honest friends and why trust is so important—these and many more little things are being lost in our hurried and unhappy existence.

We notice that fewer people expect or honor these things anymore. We feel confused because we believe everyone wants them. But we recognize how stress changes behavior—even our own—and we begin making excuses. We excuse rudeness because everyone is harried. We excuse stealing when there is plenty. We excuse lying when it doesn't hurt us personally.

We simply expect less and some say that's a good thing. If we don't expect much, after all, we can't be too disappointed.

But by not expecting much we *are* disappointed. When we are unwilling to stand toe to toe with each other and expect things like strength, maturity, competence, effort, truth, and care, we hurt. We hurt ourselves. We hurt each other. We disappoint our kids and we mortgage our future.

Expectations are powerful things. They say, "I believe in you. I know you can do this. I will show you how. I will correct your mistakes. I will encourage you. You will learn. We will share excitement together. We will laugh and cry and learn and

grow. We will be strong. We will have faith in each other and in our world because we will have learned that to expect is to honor and believe.”

We need expectations if we are to realize our own potential. We need expectations if we are to build a future. We need expectations if we are to be happy and successful and proud.

Please people, start expecting.