

What is the relationship deal between managers and employees?

The manager-employee relationship is like any other – whether it is one with our friends, our lovers, or the guy selling hotdogs outside the office. It works well when there is a fair exchange between “give” and “take”. When either person feels they are “giving” more than they are “getting” resentment seeps in, the relationship erodes and the outcomes are rarely good.

Relationships are a deal

The opportunity in every relationship is to figure out expectations at the outset. Too often assumptions are made about what the “relationship deal” is. Sometimes it is discovered too late in the game that some of these assumptions were flawed.

What we expect from any relationship is very unique driven by our personal histories, values, and life situation. One person’s idea of a great relationship deal is often another person’s definition of hell on earth.

One employee with a huge need to balance work-family may be prepared to put up with an incompetent manager in exchange for flexible hours, reasonable work demands, and a short commute. The manager may also put up with this employee’s lack of ambition, creativity and office etiquette if this employee is reliably performing a hard-to-fill role. By their respective definitions, the relationship works because each has expectations that are being met.

This type of deal may stink for another employee-manager duo. The employee may have higher expectations of a manager, one that can satisfy their need for the coaching, mentorship and stretch work opportunities that would support their ambitious plans to climb the corporate ladder. In exchange they are prepared work like a dog to support their manager’s own need to have a winning team and shine in front of the executive team.

Alignment of expectations is important

All employees sign on the dotted line to accept the tangibles of employment – how much they will get paid, the benefits they are entitled to, and the key responsibilities they will assume. But our working lives are full of intangibles that are just as important. And often more work needs to be devoted to making the intangibles of relationships more concrete at the outset.

A conversation between the manager and the employee to figure out where expectations align (and don’t) is an important one. Knowing where there are disconnects can help to bridge expectations, create work-around solutions or bail before the relationship advances too far. It’s easier to “fix” things before they are broken, much harder to repair a relationship that is crumbling.

Performance, feedback and work style: some relationship deal components

So, what are the relationship buckets that should be part of the manager-employee relationship deal? At a minimum:

Expectations on performance: Setting goals (during orientation or as part of the subsequent annual review) is the easy part – confirming that there is a shared understanding of what “exceeds expectations” vs “meets expectations” looks like; respective roles in meeting these objectives; and, where the manager’s mandate ends and the employee’s begins is a deeper conversation that supports a strong relationship. Employees also want to know if they “give” a certain level of performance, what will they “get” in terms of career development, compensation and other rewards of work.

Expectations on feedback: Feedback is important to most people, but it is often difficult to be honest when it comes to providing “constructive” feedback – particularly for an employee to give this kind of feedback to their manager. This is made easier when the criteria have been determined up front. There are many areas in which feedback can matter such as leadership style, work quality, teamwork to name a few. Defining what the desired behaviours look like together (i.e., what does strong “teamwork” entail), focuses the conversation in an objective way that leads to constructive outcomes.

Expectations on work style: Liking someone and working with them can be two different things. You can like someone in small doses and start to find them completely irritating on a day-to-day basis. Managers and employees have an opportunity to contract about how they want to work together as partners. This includes figuring out the right balance between autonomy and cooperation; the best type of communication to discuss trivial vs. more substantive matters; and the boundaries in the relationship (e.g., expectations for sharing details about non-work/personal things).

Being clear about what one is willing to “give” and what one is expecting to “get” in return lays the foundation for a strong employee-manager relationship. And in an era where we are focused on talent, productivity and engagement, isn’t the investment in time and effort worth it?

Bio: Sue Nador is a relationship strategist, helping to hash out expectations in the messy world of work. She actively blogs on the topic of personal relationships too (www.therelationshipdeal.com).