



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Coordinating Staff Efforts for Development: Mixed Expectations and Missed Opportunities

By CED Guest Author

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You are excited about a new grant possibility for the city to help

with a business incubator initiative on which you have been working. You realize that you need to start getting the application together because you are certain that this grant will soon become a city priority. You and a colleague, Avery, are talking about the work that needs to get done and Avery volunteers to “get you a draft of the background section soon.” You think this is a great plan as you have been looking for ways to help develop and empower Avery. As you think about this section of the report you quickly picture key maps about possible incubator locations, the number of small businesses in the community, figures on business retention efforts, annual enrollment in the community college entrepreneurship program, etc.

If Avery sends you a draft background section by early next week, you will be able to integrate it with other sections of the application, which you plan to work on during the remainder of that week. However, Monday comes and goes with no word or emails from Avery. The same happens on Tuesday. On Wednesday you decide that you will have to follow-up, but you get pulled into meetings for the rest of the day and don’t get a chance to send an email or place a call. Thursday morning, as you drive to work, your concern about getting the grant application finished on time and your frustration with Avery is mounting.

You open up your email inbox and see an email from Avery with the subject line “draft.” You breathe a sigh of relief ... until you open the email. There is no attachment and none of the detail you had hoped to see—just an outline and a few basic paragraphs about the city. You walk into Avery’s office, fuming, and ask, “What is the meaning of this, I was counting on you to do what you said and get the background section written for this grant and now I have waited days after we agreed and you sent me nothing more than an outline.” Avery looks somewhat astonished and says, “I do not understand why you are upset. I said I would get you a draft and I did.”

Who is at fault?

All too often in organizations, we run into situations in which there is a performance issue. In these cases, it may be easiest and human nature to look to what someone else is doing wrong—in this case, how Avery failed. And while it may be the case that someone else is at fault, we must ask, how might we be contributing to the problem? As a manager or supervisor, the following are some questions that you should consider asking yourself about each task you assign:

- Were expectations clear about the task and work product?
 - In the case of Avery, the manager had a clear expectation of what was desired, complete with maps and tables. Avery thought that a draft meant some notes on the section. Without clarity of expectations, how



can Avery know what the manager is imagining?

- Has the employee received regular feedback about work product in the past?
 - In Avery's case, consistent performance issues are not mentioned, but all too often, minor issues are left to slide in hopes that they will correct themselves—and it is not until the issues have grown that the manager takes action. Maybe Avery has done questionable work before but the manager figured that, given time, it would improve. How can Avery get better if there is no feedback on performance? Avery may have had work like this accepted before with no feedback and thought that the work product was appropriate.
- Does the employee know how to do the assigned task?
 - Is this the first time Avery has worked on a project such as this? If so, does Avery have experience, skills, and knowledge appropriate for the task at hand, or will Avery need additional supervision and guidance to complete the task adequately?
- Does the employee have the resources to do the assigned task?
 - Does Avery have access to the information that the manager expected to be included in the report? Given other responsibilities, did Avery have sufficient time to work on the project to produce the desired result?

If, in reviewing these questions, you are not able to answer them in the affirmative, then the performance problem may not be a result of the employee (or fully an issue of employee performance). It can be surprising how often unmet expectations are the source of conflict within an organization or a group—often about expectations that were never communicated. In the example above, the manager had a clear expectation of what was desired, but it wasn't the same expectation under which Avery was working.

How can we address these issues before they become a problem? A critical step is being clear about expectations. This involves agreeing on what words mean and setting timelines. For example, the statement: "I will send you a draft soon" involves a lot of words that we may assume others understand the same way we do. When meaning is not shared it can create unintentional tension and conflict. The manager could have followed up with "when you say draft, I am expecting the following things in the document you send me.....and I will need it sent to me by Monday at 5:00."

The next important step is to check in with the other person and to share the reasoning behind your statements. For example: "when you say draft, I am expecting the following things in the document you send me. *Do you have any questions about this? Is this something that you feel you can do? Is there any support you need to get this done? I expect it sent to me by Monday at 5:00. The reason I need it on Monday is to give me time to integrate the data into the proposal narrative, and I have set time aside on Tuesday to work on that. Are you able to get it to me by Monday at 5:00?*" Adding these elements allows for a conversation and sharing of needed information on both sides. In this case, Avery may not be able to get it by 5:00 on Monday and could share why: "I am booked to be out of the office for the rest of this week at training and am scheduled to be working with the planner on Monday. If you want me to make this a priority I would have to skip the training or not meet with the planner. Is this a big enough priority that you would like for me to change my plans?"

Taking the time to share information, check assumptions, and clarify terms can seem cumbersome—but the consequences of failing to do so can lead to even greater inefficiencies and perhaps workplace conflict—and may be the fault of the manager as much as the employee.

Willow Jacobson is a School of Government faculty member who focuses on employer-employee relations, human resource management, leadership development, and organizational change and development.