

## THE MESSAGE OF LOWERED EXPECTATIONS

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Lowering one's expectations may be practical and even desirable in many areas, according to the author, but not in the field of corrections, where high expectations and achievement remain the best course for carrying out the main objective of reducing crime and delinquency.

We often hear people reminisce longingly about the "good old days" and just as often we hear others make disparaging remarks about people who tend to "live in the past." The position one takes is relative to one's perspective on the past, what events are being recalled and the person who is reminiscing. Whether they were "good old days" and, if so, just *how* good, is debatable because what is considered progress by some is seen as regression by others. Like many other situations, the basic truth of the issue is probably somewhere between these opposing views—some things *were* good and some were not.

It is likely that most people would agree that many things are better today than in the past: technological developments of many kinds; medical processes and alleviation of diseases; standards and methods of education; and ease of travel, among others. On the other hand, some would argue that yesterday was better than today when it comes to the general pace of life, one's sense of stability and belongingness, and personal relationships between people.

A corollary of "the good old days" is "they don't make them like they used to," by which one means that the craftsmanship of today's products is not as solid as in days past. The same expression is sometimes used in reference to people, particularly when discussing problems of personal relations in an impersonal social environment. It is also used to describe the attitudes one displays toward work, as "you just can't get good help anymore" or "people do not seem to take pride in their work these days." These statements are commentaries on standards of workmanship which decay an inferior quality when compared to earlier times.

It is not my purpose to reminisce about the good old days or to pass judgment on them. Whether standards of product quality or relationships between people have improved or deteriorated from then until now is not really the point of our discussion—we would probably not be able to reach consensus on the questions even if they were explored. However, the question of maintaining standards or expectations is a serious issue about which we should be concerned, even if we believe that they have been maintained. “To be forewarned is to be forearmed;” so, if expectations are still high, discussion in the present may help to prevent lowering them in the future. Therefore, whether expectations have been, are now in danger of being, or may someday be lowered, it is not inappropriate to warn against the consequences of lowered expectations.

Our society has taken on an atmosphere of mediocrity in which we seem willing to accept lowered standards. This statement involves some comparison between the past and the present and asserts that standards have been eroded in many areas. Many are the consumer complaints regarding products which not only have built-in obsolescence due to style, but also seem to have built-in deterioration due to poor quality workmanship. The “why-can’t-Johnny-read?” school of thought has long decried the letdown of educational standards, and both high schools and colleges have numerous remedial classes. Lamentations over erosion of our moral standards are common from pulpits, press and other public forums. These examples indicate widespread beliefs that many of our standards are, indeed, lower today than in days gone by.

It must be said that criminal justice philosophy and practice have also been caught up in the acceptance of the mediocre with some very serious ramifications for both practitioners and clientele. We have plea-bargain justice with its built-in methods of helping offenders avoid responsibility for and the consequences of their own illegal behavior. Overly lenient sentences are prevalent enough to cause both public and politicians to demand reforms. The ineffectiveness of some correctional practices, in both institutional and field settings, is serious enough to result in complete changes of philosophy and drastic overhauling of laws and practices in some areas. There are, unfortunately, some corrections practitioners who are far more attuned to political and economic concerns than with quality of performance, resulting in actions designed only to “get by” rather than to have real impact on criminal behavior.

These examples of lowered expectations in the field of criminal justice are indicative of the need to look again at the importance of standards and the consequences of not maintaining them at a high level.

### *The Level of Expectations*

Another way to express the heading of this section would be to ask a question: how high should we set performance standards? This is because expectations, in this context, deal with levels of performance and are used interchangeably with standards.

Standards refer to established and accepted measures of such things as the extent, quantity, quality or value of something. They have to do with such practical issues as how much, how far, how high, how long, how good; and they provide models or examples for comparison so we can know

where we stand in relation to something specific. Without such measures, it would be difficult to function effectively in most areas of our social activities; we could not readily tell whether the cost of an object is fair, how far we have driven, how long we have worked or how good something is. In our everyday lives, standards help to simplify complex situations and make them more understandable; they can make some issues more meaningful and satisfying, especially when comparisons are made and we can see that we have approached, attained or even exceeded desirable measures.

Established levels of expectations are just as necessary in corrections as they are in any other field of endeavor or in daily life, because they provide direction to our actions. Once our goals have been determined, performance standards help us move in that direction because they are indicative of what is to be done, how it should be done and at what point it should be done. In this way, they serve as guideposts pointing the way to attainment of goals; they also serve as mileposts to tell us how far we have advanced toward those goals. We tend to focus our attention and move in the direction of perceived expectations, even when we do not attain the ideal level. The very existence of reasonable expectations seems to pull us in their direction, thereby providing some degree of orderliness and purpose to our activities and helping us to avoid aimless movement and useless wheel-spinning over non-essentials.

Expectations for action are also necessary for development of the individual, personally and professionally. Awareness of actions or a certain level of performance expected of us tends to cause us to stretch to meet those expectations. Just as physical exercise is necessary to physical growth, this sort of exercise is vital to psychosocial and/or professional development. Of course, there must be a challenge; we need to be stretched, to exert some effort to reach an expected level, or the exercise will become a routine without significant results. In this sense, "the high road is the right road" because the higher expectations do serve to challenge us. Historically, people (as individuals, groups, nations) have been able to rise to the occasion when the situation demanded their best; and they have become better people for the effort even when ideal expectations are not perfectly attained, because the struggle helps to develop abilities, stamina and character. It has been truly observed that growth is the only true sign of life.

Performance standards are essential to any concept of accountability. In this sense, the standards are the beginning, not the final result. To hold someone accountable means that expectations for performance have been clearly articulated before one is supposed to meet them. Rules of the game must be established in the beginning and not made up or changed as the game progresses. Anything less than this is plainly unfair and serves to defeat the whole concept of accountability. Although it is necessary that we know by what standards we are to be judged, we must also feel that the standards can be attained. While expectations should be high enough to challenge us to stretch to meet them, they must not be too high to discourage effort. Expectations, therefore, must be realistic if they are to be an acceptable basis for accountability.

These comments regarding expectations are applicable to individuals and organizations in many fields, including corrections. There is also an-

other important observation to be made and applied specifically to corrections. This is simply that clearly articulated and widely promulgated expectations are necessary because of the vital importance of what corrections practitioners do. Crime is a big problem in this country; so much so that a sizable proportion of our citizens rate it as the most important domestic problem facing us today, and they expect corrections, along with the rest of the criminal justice system, to effectively address the problem. This is, to be certain, a very difficult issue with which to deal. However; corrections must try to come to grips with "the crime problem" in such a way as to reduce the incidence of crime among those who are under our jurisdiction, because they seem to commit so much of it. Not everyone would agree that this is a proper goal of correctional effort; but the author submits that this must be the overall aim of corrections endeavors whether they are encompassed in philosophies of rehabilitation, deterrence or punishment. To this end, the actions of corrections practitioners are extremely important to the quality of life in this country because they relate to a safe and peaceful living environment. This, along with the awesome impact our actions have—for good or bad—on the lives, families and futures of our clients, demand performance standards at realistic levels.

### *The Message of Lowered Expectations*

It is important that corrections maintain a high level of expectations for ourselves as practitioners and for all our clientele. The reason has to do with the message which accompanies expectations that are set very low or are allowed to be lowered after having been set higher. For most of us, a number of people contribute to our overall perception of expectations. Much of what eventually becomes one's perceptions of expectations for oneself comes from external sources, and contributions are made by a variety of persons who are meaningful to us or are in a position to set standards for us. Thus, practitioners play a part, along with courts and administrative agencies, in the determination of expectations for our clients. Agency administrators set levels of expectations for staff members and our colleagues also contribute to what we perceive is expected of us. As professional practitioners we also set some standards for ourselves in order to maintain internal integrity of performance.

What, then, is the message from practitioner to client, administrator to subordinate, one colleague to another, or to ourselves when the level of expectations is significantly lowered? What is the real meaning conveyed by such action? These are crucial questions because what we say is not necessarily what we intend to convey; and both our intent and our words may be different from what is perceived by others. Look at the message of lowered expectations from the perspective of those to whom the expectations are applied.

Expectations that are lower than they should be to ensure acceptable levels of performance and to challenge the people for whom they are meant, imply lack of caring for those people. If we really care for others, we expect positive things of them. Parents expect good conduct of their children, and provide the kind of training and discipline on which such behavior can be based, out of love for those children. The idea here can be summed up in a paraphrase of a well-known commercial slogan: when

you care enough, you expect the very best. The same principal applies to corrections. When we really care about our clients, one another and our profession, we do expect quality of performance. Holding realistically high expectations for others is one indication of a caring attitude.

Lowered expectations imply lack of confidence in people to perform at a high level. Realistic expectations are set at levels that are not so easily attained as to bore people or cause them to lose interest for lack of challenge. When we set high standards, we say to others, "we have confidence in your ability to perform at that level and we expect you to do so." On the other hand, when expectations are set low, we are saying to others, "you really cannot do any better than that, so we have set the standards at a level we consider to be within your abilities." There is no challenge to this, so people will most likely do only what is expected—if they even bother to put forth that much effort. The result is boredom, misuse or lack of use of talents that can help an organization reach its goals, or maybe even resentments over such a low opinion of one's abilities. Thus, low expectations convey a message of depreciation of the abilities of others and will probably bring negative results.

Standards that are set low imply a lack of concern for the importance of the work being done. The old adage, anything worth doing is worth doing well, is applicable here. If our tasks are unimportant or have little meaning in their impact, it really makes no difference where the standards are set. But if the work is of real value and/or has significant consequences, that very meaningfulness demands expectations at a level commensurate with the importance. Anything less is irresponsible. As we have already noted, the end result of what corrections practitioners are supposed to do is of vital importance to all citizens; therefore, performance standards must be in direct proportion to the value of such activity.

Closely akin to the preceding thought is a final one: lowered expectations imply a lack of commitment to one's goals. The message is one of a dilatory attitude: "I really do not care about the goals that have been set and toward which my actions have ostensibly been directed. The goals are not worthwhile, so I have adjusted my expectations to reflect this." Psychologically, we will only be committed toward those things that we believe to be, for whatever reasons, worthwhile. If one is not committed to some goal, it is unlikely that much effort or time will be spent in its pursuit. Consequently, when we lower expectations of performance, we say to others that we did not really mean our first articulation of expectations and are not now pushing to sustain them; therefore, those for whom the standards were intended can forget them.

### *Conclusion*

The result of these implied messages is the creation of an atmosphere of accepting the mediocre. We begin to take things for granted and stop striving to attain excellence. We do just enough to "get by" and for all practical purposes retire on the job; we become afflicted with the "so-so" syndrome. The message people get from all this is the dull grey of mediocrity where one begins to wonder if anything is really important. Instead of an atmosphere of expected success, where the focus is on the positive,

we build an atmosphere of expected failure, where the focus is on the negative or the "shall nots" so typical of corrections direction.

We would probably all agree that standards are essential in all or most aspects of corrections efforts; our disagreement would be as to the level at which these standards should be set. It is not easy to determine the appropriate level of expectations for all corrections practitioners or clientele; it is a matter of best judgment rather than scientific precision. But once those expectations are established at reasonable and realistically attainable levels, we lower them or allow others to lower them at the risk of negating the importance of our task, creating an atmosphere of mediocrity, and undermining the effectiveness of the corrections thrust. We cannot allow this to happen—for the sake of our communities, our clients and ourselves.



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