

LEADING TEAMS

# Are Your High Expectations Hurting Your Team?

by Ron Carucci

JANUARY 15, 2019



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During a recent interview with a member of my client’s executive team, a leader said to me, “Nothing I do is ever good enough for [the CEO]. We’re all starting to ask ourselves why we bother trying.” When I later debriefed the assessment findings with the CEO, she said, “People consistently disappoint me. It’s always been that way. I have high standards. That’s why I get the results that I do.”

When we discussed the unintended consequences of her expectations, it had never occurred to her that she was undermining the very results she sought. Conventional management wisdom suggests that setting a high bar for employees is a good thing. But when employees can never reach that bar, those high standards become weapons, leaving bitterness and unrealized potential in their wake.

This study of more than 300 executives in 10 countries shows that approximately 35% of executives fail because of a tendency toward perfection. That's because achievement-oriented leaders tend to be chronically dissatisfied. While you may be thinking that you're "just pushing them to be the best," you may actually be setting them up to fail. Step back and reconsider whether your constant pushing may have unwanted side effects. Here are a few you might see:

**Disappointment in yourself.** It's often not just your direct reports you hold to an unreasonably high standard. In my experience consulting with executives, it's common for a leader's discontent to turn inward. Without the ability to feel satisfied with their best or proud of their accomplishment, these leaders often lack joy and professional satisfaction. If you're one of these leaders, pay attention to the stories you tell yourself about your performance. If the narrative is one of inadequacy or you struggle to take pride in your accomplishments and abilities, it may be a sign that your high standards have warped your own self-perception.

**Loss of self-confidence in others.** In their book, *Impossible to Please*, Neil Lavender and Alan Cavailoa write, "When you find yourself working with or for a controlling perfectionist, it's common to feel angry and frustrated or even worse, you feed into their hypercriticism and begin to feel inferior, like you can't do anything right." If your high standards are causing others to feel inadequate, eventually they lose confidence and stop trying. They may second guess themselves while privately resenting you and fearing your regular critiques. Worst of all, because they can't tell where your unfair standards end and where their shortfalls begin, they aren't able to improve. As one of the direct reports of the CEO mentioned above so aptly put it, "After a while, the safest thing to do is nothing. Whatever she screams about that day is what I work on."

**Little organizational resilience.** When a team is constantly feeling second-guessed or criticized, it has a harder time bouncing back after a setback. People become paralyzed rather than creative when facing challenges. A leader's perpetual dissatisfaction can drain a team's resourcefulness. If you worry about whether your organization can rally in the face of major problems, your constant push

to reach ever rising standards may be the cause. And if you have aspirations you want your team to achieve, your expectations may actually be weakening their ability to do so.

If you've seen any of these consequences in your organization, here are some things you can do.

**Learn to harness your discontent.** Your dissatisfaction can be an asset; the key is being selective when you use it. In situations where people need to improve, pushing them to stretch can help close the gap. But because of the power that you have over others, your discontent carries more weight and impact. People want to please their leader, and when they believe they can't, it's demoralizing. But if they believe they can meet your standards, they are more likely to believe they can be successful when you raise those standards. Be judicious about when and how often you express dissatisfaction.

**Never let others question their value in your view.** I asked my CEO client who wasn't aware of the consequences stemming from her high standards, "Do members of your team know what you value about each of them?" She couldn't answer definitively. She naturally assumed her team shared her drive for perfection and never considered that her critique made them feel incompetent. If you want those you lead to take your critique to heart, it's imperative they know what you find special about them and their contributions. It doesn't matter how senior an executive is. You can never take for granted every leader's need to know they – and their work – matter to you. Inventory the unique value each member of your team creates, and when you see that value in action, be intentional about telling them.

**Examine how and when you set standards.** Perfectionistic leaders often don't communicate their "high standards" until others miss their expectations. When you observe a gap between what you get and what you wanted, pause before reacting. Ask yourself if the person who fell short understood what you expected. Then, ask yourself if what you wanted was realistic given the circumstances and abilities of your team. Being honest about what you base your expectations on, and clearly conveying them to others in a timely manner, ensures your standards aren't just high, but realistic and fair.

**Embrace your own goodness.** You will be more forgiving of others if you loosen expectations of yourself. Take stock of where your self-perception lacks objectivity, and what conditions trigger

your self-contempt. If you surface strong resistance or emotion as you consider areas where you shine, that's likely a sign that the origins of your harsh discontent may lie deeper than you think.

As a leader, you have the opportunity to unleash the greatest contributions of others. Appropriately raising the bar allows them to grow as your organization progresses. If your standards are too harsh, inadvertently hurting others, find out why, and learn to use your discontent for the good of those you lead.



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**Jay Butler** 4 hours ago

I enjoyed this article.

There is always a delicate balance between driving continual growth and target setting. As an automotive professional for more than 20 years, I am very aware of the cycle of target setting-achievement-setting-achievement. The industry is extremely competitive, with the different OEMs constantly working to be first to market with new technology, lower costs / greater profitability, and higher quality. It is a great thing for consumers, as new cars are safer, less expensive to own, have higher quality, and continue to introduce new technology. But for the teams manufacturing the parts going into those cars, and those assembling the final vehicle, the never ending cycle of improvement can wear on the team both mentally and physically. "Do more with less" has been an ongoing mantra inside automotive. In addition to what you noted above, there is a more nefarious impact to organizations that don't balance expectations around continuous improvement. In an effort to maintain the storyline of achievement, leaders will force their teams to manage data and information in a way that is not truthful, or tells a story that is not entirely true. This results in an organization that is distinctions, political, and ultimately self-defeating. The efforts are often in the name of keeping company leadership and investors happy, but it destroys morale.

As a confusion to this article, I suggest this YouTube video by Shawn Achor (<https://youtu.be/fLJsdqxnZb0>). Enjoy!

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