Expectations as Culture: Creating Clarity That Strengthens How We Succeed Together

In this edition, we're focusing on Expectations—the shared understandings that guide how we work together, deliver results, and stay aligned. From project timelines and communication norms to how we define success, clear expectations shape both our outcomes and our culture.

Do our expectations create clarity and confidence, or do they leave room for confusion and uneven follow-through?

Are we intentional about making expectations visible, revisiting them, and ensuring they support how we want to collaborate to advance OVPR's mission?

Let's explore how thoughtful expectation-setting can strengthen accountability, reduce friction, and build trust one conversation, agreement, and follow-up at a time.

Quick Wins for Your Unit

Practical, high-impact strategies for aligning your environment with your values

Culture takes root when people know what's expected and feel confident in their contributions. Clarity doesn't have to come from a major reset. It can start with simple, visible actions that make shared standards easier to understand and live out.

Here are a few quick actions your team can take this week to build clarity and consistency:

- **Make priorities visible**. Use a shared document or dashboard to show what's in the work queue, what's in progress, what's next, and what's been completed. This helps everyone understand where to focus their energy and how their work connects to the bigger picture.
- **Define success together.** Before starting a project, agree on what the desired outcome looks like. Capture it in one sentence or a brief checklist, so that everyone has a shared understanding of what a successful project outcome looks like.
- **Normalize clarification**. Encourage people to inquire for specifics by asking questions like, "What's most important to focus on right now?", "Who's taking the lead on this?" or "Does this align with what we agreed on earlier?", during meetings or check-ins. This keeps everyone clear on priorities, responsibilities, and next steps.
- **Establish consistent rhythms**. Keep recurring meetings and deadlines predictable so your team can plan ahead and rely on a steady cadence. Reinforce your mission, principles, or even a shared quote in both physical and virtual common spaces to promote alignment and connection.

Try This with Your Team

Build shared awareness and ownership through simple, team-based practices

Start a conversation: Expectations work best when they're co-created. These quick exercises help teams align around what they need from one another and what success means together.

- Run a "clarity check" roundtable. Ask each person: What expectations feel clear right now? Which ones don't? Capture themes and identify one or two that need more definition.
- Create a "Ways We Work" guide. Together, outline your norms for communication, decision-making, and follow-up. Keep it short; something people will actually use.
- Revisit expectations regularly. At the end of a project or quarter, ask: What expectations helped us succeed? Which ones got in our way? Adjust as needed.
- Practice expectation-setting in real time. At the start of a meeting, clarify the goal and what you hope to achieve, and then check at the end to see if you were successful.

See It in Action: OVPR Strategic Partnerships and Inclusive Excellence (SPIE) Team

The OVPR Strategic Partnerships and Inclusive Excellence (SPIE) team has found a simple but powerful way to stay aligned: a living weekly agenda that captures everything needing attention, whether it's a near-term task, a long-term project, or a follow-up item waiting in the wings.

At the heart of the team's approach are co-created 'living agendas' that, as one team member put it, "give shape to strategy. They're how we bring our mission into the room, link performance to purpose, and plan two steps ahead without losing sight of what matters now".

Each week, the team reviews and updates the agenda together. It's the single source of truth for what's active, what's on deck, and what decisions are pending. This shared rhythm ensures everyone knows what's expected, where their contributions fit, and what's coming next.

By turning expectation-setting into a standing habit, the team has strengthened accountability, reduced miscommunication, and built confidence that nothing important will slip through the cracks.

Share Your Practice

We'd love to feature examples from across our research community.

👉 ovpr.spie@umich.edu to tell us what your team is doing to shape environments that reflect what you value.

(Adapted from: Project Zero. (n.d.). Cultures of thinking. Harvard Graduate School of Education. http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-8-forces-that-shape-group-culture and Ritchhart, R. (2015).

FOUNDATIONS: Laying the Groundwork for Transformative Change

Creating Cultures of Thinking: The 8 Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform Our Schools. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.)