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BUSINESS ADVANCEMENT INC.®

The Harper Report:

“Success” or “Failure”? It’s All How you Shape Expectations

As we ramp up into the first quarter of 2012, we’re seeing an interesting paradox. The latest news from the U.S. Department of Commerce is that fourth-quarter growth of 2.8% is the fastest in 18 months. However, despite this good report, some economists are painting a less optimistic picture that our expectations of a rapid recovery may not be met. On a smaller scale, we’re all managing expectations – some more successfully than others.

Take the example of Research In Motion Ltd. (RIM), the once-dominant maker of email enabled cell phones. Before they stepped down from RIM’s helm on January 22, 2012, former co-CEOs Mike Lazaridis and Jim Balsillie drew strong criticism for RIM’s falling income and resultant drops in stock valuation. Even though the company still remained well in the black, their difficulties in outlining a clear path toward recovering lost market share and managing investor expectations has been cited by industry observers as at least partly responsible for the 75% drop in RIM stock price in 2011. New CEO Thorsten Heins will be well advised to heed the words of a major investor who was quoted in the *Montreal Gazette* as saying,

“...[RIM] management has to be much better at managing expectations and delivering on those expectations.” Meeting that challenge will significantly increase the odds that Heins and his leadership team will be able to revive RIM’s fortunes.

Consider whether your own expectations for a successful outcome are based on concrete evidence, assumptions, or wishful thinking.

So how do you more realistically shape expectations so that employees, customers, investors, suppliers, alliance partners, and others who have a stake in your organization perceive less “failure” and more “success?” Here are three guidelines:

1) Ground your own expectations in reality

One of the most difficult aspects of shaping expectations of others around the current or future plans is stepping back to consider whether your own expectations for a successful outcome are based on concrete evidence, assumptions, or

wishful thinking. Taking a moment to compare factors which will be critical for your success against what already exists or can be readily put into place will not only increase your confidence but that of others as well. For instance, what evidence do you have that your organization actually has the necessary capabilities and willingness to effectively execute the strategy within the timeframe you need?

For example, one ambitious CEO who was new to his position realized that his organization would need to make a substantial transformation from hierarchical silos to a cross-functional team structure to address both morale and other productivity issues before he could further expand the company and accomplish the Board's growth objectives. By acknowledging this reality and laying out his plans for dealing with the situation, along with the rewards that would bring, he was able to gain support from his board and other stakeholders to make the investment in time and resources to smooth the road to growth. Likewise, realistically acknowledging challenges you anticipate along the way, and how your company is prepared to meet them will increase credibility far more than painting a trouble-free future. The more concrete proof you can provide yourself to back-up your own expectations for success, the better you can position yourself to influence and face the challenges of others.

2) Tailor your message

It's a proven fact that the more credible someone perceives you are, the more likely they are to have high expectations regarding your idea – even if it isn't fully fleshed out. Over the years, our research and experience has repeatedly shown us that leaders who tailor their communication to the needs of different stakeholders are much more effective at shaping expectations than those who communicate using a "One Size Fits All" approach. Certainly, it's essential to keep your core message consistent when communicating with a variety of stakeholders; however individuals and groups

have vastly different needs for the type of information they receive (details or big picture), the frequency they need to receive it, and the channels by which it arrives. For example, one group may need formal weekly in-depth analysis reports sent through email, while other groups may be better served by quarterly summaries on your company's website or outreach through social media networks. When the stakes are particularly high, it becomes even more important to use channels that promote more personal contact. In fact, depending upon the situation, sometimes quick and spontaneous conversations on the phone, in person, or by video conference can be especially impactful.

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The more effectively you tap into the *many* formal and informal communication channels your key stakeholders actually rely upon in different situations, the greater your chances of being perceived by them as credible, and the better able you'll be to shape their expectations. For more tips to increase credible communication, read the *Investor's Business Daily* article featuring Pam: [*IBD's 10 Secrets to Success: Tailoring Your Message.*](#)

3) Demonstrate progress - and prepare others for bumps along the way

While quick wins are a great way to boost enthusiasm at first, maintaining stakeholder support over the long haul is even more important to gaining a successful outcome, especially when the objectives are ambitious and time frames extend over months or even years. One way to do this is to identify a series of small "check points" to supplement major milestones for success. However, in this rapidly changing business

environment, it's just as important to acknowledge at the outset of launching a strategy or major initiative the likelihood of encountering unexpected challenges as conditions change. Developing and communicating the existence of contingency plans, and then demonstrating by example how surprises are handled as they unfold, will provide reassurance that "bumps" in the road to success are normal and manageable.

For example, at the beginning of one project where we were working with a client based in both the US and China, we spent time at the outset of the project identifying potential ways to address and overcome the likely challenges of communicating across different cultures and time zones. This enabled all of us to jointly prepare contingencies ahead of time, more quickly recognize the challenges when they did occur, switch to "Plan B," and celebrate checkpoints and milestones on target. Clearly identifying critical signposts of sustained progress, communicating with key stakeholders through a variety of channels along the way, and jointly developing contingency plans

to address potential problems goes a long way in reassuring stakeholders that their expectations will be met in the end.

Achieving greater success lies not just in having different ideas, but in also shaping others' expectations so that they can see what you are seeing and engage in helping you succeed.

The Bottom Line:

Sometimes achieving greater success lies not just in having different ideas, but in also shaping others' expectations so that they can see what you are seeing and engage in helping you succeed. When your own expectations are grounded in reality, it's much easier to develop balanced communication and trust. Doing this on an ongoing basis will enable your stakeholders to more readily recognize and celebrate the successes as well as better handle the twists and turns along the way.



About the authors:

Pamela S. Harper is the Founding Partner and CEO of Business Advancement Inc. (BAI), based in Glen Rock, NJ. Pam is an internationally known business performance advisor, author, and professional speaker with over 20 years experience in internal and external consulting to entrepreneurial, middle market, and Fortune 500 companies in a wide range of industries, all going through extraordinary growth and change. Pam is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Preventing Strategic Gridlock®: Leading Over, Under & Around Organizational Jams to Achieve High Performance Results* (Cameo Publications, 2003). She has published and been quoted in prominent media outlets including: *BusinessWeek.com*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Red Herring*, *Entrepreneur*, and other major media around the world.

D. Scott Harper, Ph.D. is Sr. Partner and COO of BAI. He is a globally recognized expert in innovation processes and systems with a unique ability to translate technical insights into desired business results, gained from over 20 years of leadership experience in Johnson & Johnson Consumer Company, Pfizer Consumer Healthcare, and Warner-Lambert Company. Some of the household name products Scott has been part of launching and supporting products including CoolMint Listerine® Antiseptic mouthrinse and its successors, Purell® Hand Sanitizer, and Neosporin® ointment. He has helped advance innovation initiatives globally, and has been quoted in business journals such as *Chief Executive Magazine*.

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