



Ten Steps for Handling Unrealistic Expectations at Work

Systems of Work

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September 11, 2021

It is common for professionals to feel overwhelmed at work if they face unrealistic expectations from their supervisors. Without the ability to set reasonable boundaries, establish priorities and maintain a healthy work-life balance, it can be challenging to foster success in your role. If you are facing unrealistic expectations at work, there are a few strategies you can use to navigate such a situation effectively. In this article, we offer a few examples of unrealistic expectations you may encounter at work and outline a 10-step guide for handling them.

What Are Some Unrealistic Expectations at Work?

As a professional, you may encounter distinct types of unrealistic expectations in your role. Here are a few examples of unrealistic expectations to help you better understand the types of situations that require intervention:

Overly demanding workload: If your supervisor expects you to complete too many tasks within an unreasonable period, they may have unrealistic expectations of you and be overestimating your abilities. While you may have the potential to work through periods of high demand in your role, consistently facing a stressful amount of work can make success unattainable.

Working while on vacation: Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is important for any professional—relaxing and being available for self-care can help you focus better upon your return to your role. Therefore, if you feel pressure to work while on vacation, it is you are facing unrealistic expectations in your position.

Meeting deadlines while short-staffed: If your organization or team is currently short-staffed, productivity levels might dip, which may make it challenging for you to meet the deadlines established while you were at full capacity. If your supervisor does not modify their expectations around deadlines during staff shortages, this can make reaching goals impractical.

Understanding expectations without communication: To understand your role at work and the tasks you are responsible for completing on a day-to-day basis, your supervisor and colleagues must communicate with you effectively. Without clear communication, it may be challenging to meet your supervisor's expectations.

How to Handle Unrealistic Expectations at Work

There are various strategies you can use to handle unrealistic expectations at work and cultivate success as a professional. Here is a step-by-step guide to follow as you navigate this experience:

1. Practice setting and enforcing boundaries

If you feel like you are facing unrealistic expectations at work, try to practice setting boundaries and enforcing them with consistency. For instance, if your supervisor asks you to take on an additional project with a large scope that you cannot complete within a reasonable timeframe, communicate this boundary, and help your supervisor produce an alternative plan. This practice can help your supervisor better understand what your limits are so you can succeed in your role.

2. Consider your supervisor's intentions

While feeling overwhelmed with your supervisor's expectations of you, try to consider their perspective in the situation. It is likely that your supervisor does not have negative intentions. Rather, they may simply not understand how you are feeling and believe strongly in your abilities. Understanding your supervisor's intentions may help you empathize with their position and produce ways to make their expectations more attainable for you.

3. Solicit help from your co-workers to reach goals

Collaboration can help you overcome unrealistic workload expectations. If you are facing an upcoming deadline or cannot handle all the tasks associated with a project's scope independently, ask your co-workers for help in reaching your goals. Having assistance can help you meet expectations while preserving your energy and decreasing your stress levels.

4. Meet with your supervisor and offer feedback

It is important to communicate with your supervisor and offer feedback if you feel that you are facing unrealistic expectations in your role. Consider meeting with your manager and vocalizing your perspective. They may understand why you feel this way and offer solutions for a more feasible workload.

5. Create a workflow timeline that can help you succeed

If your supervisor establishes an unrealistic timeline for a project with a deadline you cannot meet, create your own workflow timeline that is more reasonable. From here, you can show your timeline to your supervisor so they can visualize what expectations are realistic. This may help your supervisor gain perspective and make shifts in the future to establish workable timelines.

6. Take steps to maintain a healthy work-life balance

In order to succeed in your role, maintaining a healthy work-life balance is key. One part of a healthy work-life balance is taking time for yourself so you can decompress and relax. Therefore, make sure you schedule time for self-care or take vacations and set clear boundaries around your ability to work during these periods.

7. Establish and verbalize your priorities

If you are already working on a high-priority project and your supervisor assigns you additional work, it is important that you communicate what your current workflow priorities are. It is possible that your supervisor forgot about the high-priority project or assumes you will start the additional work after you finish. Taking these possibilities into account, establishing your priorities can help all parties understand what expectations are realistic.

8. Offer positive reinforcement when your supervisor sets realistic expectations

When your supervisor is realistic with their expectations of you, positively reinforce this behaviour. You can do this by expressing your gratitude for their generous timeline or their flexibility with deadlines. If your supervisor knows how much you appreciate their reasonability, they may commit themselves to setting realistic expectations more regularly.

9. Communicate effectively and regularly

If your supervisor does not communicate clearly, try to initiate conversations about their expectations consistently. You can ask targeted questions to parse out what they expect of you and discuss whether you can meet such goals reasonably. Doing this on a consistent basis may allow you to better understand your role, find ways to succeed and encourage your supervisor to communicate effectively.

10. Take time to celebrate your successes

Whenever you succeed—especially in the face of unrealistic expectations or periods of high demand—take time to celebrate yourself and convey your achievements to your supervisor. You can do this by detailing your progress in regular status reports or during regular check-ins. These updates may help your supervisor recognize your value and understand how their expectations affect you.