

# I'D LIKE A PEGASUS NOW PLEASE, AND HERE'S WHY

## 'WHY—WHAT—WHEN' TO CLEARLY COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS



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I came across an Internet meme recently that really made me laugh. It's a photo of a man crouching forward as an artist works on a tattoo on his back.

In his hand, he holds a picture of what he wants his tattoo to look like: an intricate drawing of Pegasus, a powerful winged stallion with wings stretched out.

But we also see the work in progress. The artist, though looking like he is trying his best, has tattooed what appears to be an outline of an ill-shaped donkey with wings more befitting a ladybird.

While the photo is likely staged, I wonder if that is so far from the realities we observe in workplaces today.

Leaders expecting a Pegasus and getting a "My Little Unicorn" instead? That's not so rare. And definitely not as funny.

We're looking at a situation here involving unmet expectations. What was hoped to be an image of strength has turned out to be a child's temporary tattoo lookalike.

An instruction has been given, but the demonstrated result doesn't live up to expectations.

But how does this happen? How does a powerful Pegasus become a weak four-legged creature with fairy wings?

How does a report, expected to be comprehensive, turn out disjointed or missing crucial information? How does a presentation, expected to 'wow' a client, turn out dull and ineffective?

There can be multiple reasons for unmet expectations, including lack of resources and lack of empowerment. But one big potential factor could also be a breakdown in the communication of those expectations.

### MAKING EXPECTATIONS UNDERSTOOD — A MISSING ELEMENT

"Complete this report, and send it back to me by noon."

That's how many of us would normally communicate when we need a task done. It's the traditional "What-When" approach for conveying expectations. We say **what** we want to get done, and **when** it needs to be done:

"Pull together this information for me in the next hour." Full stop.

While undoubtedly, the What-When approach still gets things done, there is a problem with this formula. It doesn't provoke nor inspire any sense of ownership in the task.

It is purely instructional in nature and wouldn't motivate someone to go the "second mile".

Authors Roger Connors and Tom Smith in the bestseller *How Did That Happen* explain it like this: The What-When approach "fails to engage the hearts and minds of people in a way that motivates them to follow through



and do what it takes to deliver on key expectations".

When we only communicate "what" needs to be done and "when", we are purely instructing and not ensuring that recipients understand and take personal ownership of the task.

Especially in situations involving tight timelines, or crucial deals, can we really afford to hear "Well, I didn't know that this was what you wanted" or "It was just too hard"?

As we observe dynamics at work increasingly favouring a collaborative atmosphere instead of a route of command-and-control, the What-When approach is predictably only going to continue to decline in effectiveness with newer generations.

### DON'T FORGET THE "WHY"

What Connors and Smith propose is an insertion of the "why", which must pave the way for "what" and "when" in order to engage and boost motivation to meet the expectation.

If we prefaced the instruction "Complete this report, and send it back to me by noon" with "The department head is heading out at 12.30pm to meet a key client that is considering engaging the company for a huge deal, and he really needs this information", the response and delivery could be very different.

What the "why" approach also silently communicates is that the person "is worth the time and effort it takes to enroll and engage them in the mission. (...) It tells people that you respect them, that you value them as key contributors to the process of getting things done," write Connors and Smith.

This Why-What-When approach works with the communication of different levels of expectations, from the completion of daily tasks, to expectations that may take years to fulfil, like

the turnaround of a company.

When Howard Schultz returned as CEO of Starbucks in January 2008, the company was in bad shape. In 2007, the value of Starbucks shares had fallen 42%.

There was increased competition in the market, and in the words of his leaked 2007 memo to the then CEO, Jim Donald, Schultz thought that the Starbucks experience had been watered down and the brand "commoditised", all for the sake of growth.

But when he returned, Schultz didn't jump straight to pushing "what" he wanted employees to do and "when" they needed to do it by. Instead, he spent time and resources explaining "why".

In his first week, he made a public apology to all employees for having let them down and promised that the glory days of Starbucks would return.

He reiterated the importance of "the pursuit of an unequivocal, absolute commitment to quality" and to back his words up, in February 2008, he closed all 7,100 stores for a few hours to retrain employees on how to make a good espresso.

He also took 10,000 store managers away to a conference in New Orleans. In a 2010 interview with *Harvard Business Review*, he explained that this was to rally the leadership of the company together and to be "vulnerable and transparent with our employees about how desperate the situation was".

A number of hard decisions had to be made in the ensuing years, including closing down stores and cutting jobs, but throughout it all, Schultz spent time and resources drilling in the mission and values of Starbucks (the "why" that powered all expectations).

It ultimately paid off, and Schultz successfully steered the company out of stormy waters. In 2009, Starbucks' share price more than doubled, and profits tripled from 2008 to 2010.

### CONCLUSION

We may not be facing a situation of Schultz's magnitude, but the "why" can apply to even the simplest of requests: "I need to take this call. Could you please meet the client on your own first? I'll join you soon."

Perhaps if the man getting the Pegasus tattoo had taken the time to explain to the artist why he was getting it (maybe it was to commemorate an anniversary or to function as a symbol of strength) and engaged the heart and mind of the artist, he would have been honestly told by the artist that he didn't possess the skills necessary to draw a Pegasus.

Of course, getting people excited and ensuring that they understand what is expected of them does not guarantee success, but clearly communicating expectations would definitely provide a strong start.

Try applying the Why-What-When formula in your communications this coming week. You may be pleasantly surprised at the results.

■ Lily Cheah leads employee, customer and alumni engagement at Leaderonomics, and believes that small details play a big part in huge successes, including always explaining "why". To read more articles by Lily, visit [www.leaderonomics.com](http://www.leaderonomics.com). To engage with her, email us at [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com)

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