



BRIEF

Agreements, Expectations, and Commitments

By [Mike Frascolla](#)

Introduction

We believe great organizations should have a list of Essential Agreements that guide their day-to-day operations. They are:

- **What** we do (how we make life better)
- **Why** we do it (our Just Cause)
- **Who we serve** (our [Ideal Customer](#))
- **How** we serve our Ideal Customer
- **Where** we're going

- **When** we plan to get from here to there
- **Who we are** as a group



These Agreements, in the end, shape the **Commitments** team members make to team leaders and to each other. Because when people participate in forming Agreements, they're more invested – committed – than if they're simply told what's expected of them.

And that's the heart of the matter: establishing Agreements with team members is different – and vastly preferred – to imposing one-way, nonnegotiable expectations on them.

Turning Agreements into Commitments creates a healthy, trust-based culture where every stakeholder is invested in achieving the organization's shared Vision.

Expectations vs. Agreements

Let's start with a simple question: which message is more likely to be well-received by team members? "I expect you to complete the following by ..." or "Let's agree on a process to complete the following by ..."?

Can't imagine too many people leaning toward the first example, right? There are many reasons expectations don't belong in great companies:

- **Expectations are disappointing.** If they are not met, all parties are disappointed. On the other hand, if they are met, nobody celebrates because it's only what was expected of them.
- **Expectations are bullying.** The just-do-it-because-I-said-so approach to leadership is a demeaning relic of the past.
- **Expectations are lazy.** They convey a lack of willingness to talk about what people, processes, tools, technology, and time are necessary to get the job done.
- **Expectations are cowardly.** Knowingly or unknowingly setting expectations signals that what team members think or feel doesn't matter — the decision has been made without a conversation.
- **Expectations are toxic.** The leader is essentially saying, "This is what needs to be done, and I'm not really interested in what you think on the matter."

When we impose expectations on others, they'll eventually begin to resent us. Striving to create Agreements with people, however, has the exact opposite effect. Agreements show people that:

1. We see them.
2. We want an authentic relationship with them.
3. We care about who they are, what they do, and what they think.
4. We're here to support them and help them grow.
5. We're willing to let them solve problems their way.
6. We want to know how things are going.

7. We're here to help them [Get Smart Stuff Done](#).

Agreements are about working together, taking what we know about the time and resources available, and creating a solution or path to new opportunities. This kind of collaboration is at the core of every [High-Trust Company \(HTC\)](#).

Of course, it only works when team members genuinely intend to honor their Agreements. We're looking for people who will "walk the walk." With Agreements in place, we're now ready to turn them into Commitments.

The Difference Between Commitments and Agreements

Making a Commitment is a pledge that conveys one is willing to put other interests ahead of their own. It may be easy for people to Agree on a common goal, for instance, but it's another thing entirely when they Commit to undertaking the actions needed to bring that goal to fruition.

Leaders foster Commitment and committed people take action. In fact, they delight in doing so. Focus on gaining Commitment in meetings — not just Agreement — and you'll see a high level of motivation from team members determined to help realize the organization's goals.

Hopefully Helpful Hints

Establishing Essential Agreements will guide an organization from the top down. When everyone believes in these Agreements, there's a high level of motivation to do Work that truly matters.

Commitments stem from Agreements (instead of expectations) because both parties are stakeholders — the leader(s) and the team member(s). Each wants to uphold their end and ensure a favorable outcome.

Turning expectations into Agreements is key to building the kind of [culture](#) often found in High-Trust Companies. Once we eliminate expectations, we eliminate misunderstandings and drastically enhance our ability to be fact-based leaders and coaches.

Takeaway

Forming Agreements demonstrates a desire for authentic relationships, ongoing support, and mutual accountability. Setting expectations can have the exact opposite effect and can severely compromise the level of commitment from team members and, thus, the health of the entire organization. Turning Agreements into Commitments creates an organization where every stakeholder is invested in the future and works together to achieve a shared [Vision](#).

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