

Expectations vs. Reality

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I often hear this from clients in transition: how surprised/ disappointed they have been by a lack of help from those they most expected to provide it. Friends and colleagues who verbally detailed a long list of “people you need to meet”— followed by radio silence and no follow-through on promised introductions. Or those who spoke warmly of “working together” and how awesome that would be...followed post-transition by “sorry, but I don’t think that is going to work after all”— leaving a seemingly strong relationship fractured by the awkward, confusing, and abrupt change in tone and plan.

Transitioning is taxing—and the disappointment from these unfulfilled expectations adds to the stress of the season. Many go into the transition counting on key people to help, and when they fail to deliver, it feels like betrayal. A friend of mine, cautioning about the risk of setting high expectations, would quote her father’s “Disappointment Equation”: $\text{Disappointment} = \text{Expectation} - \text{Reality}$. She would share her father’s wisdom: by lowering expectations, we lower the probability and level of disappointment. Her father’s advice echoed in my head as I listened to clients’ stories of disappointment when promises evaporated.

Thankfully, their stories almost always had an uplifting Part Two: “Those whom I least expected, stepped up and really helped me.” “I hardly knew person x, but they reached out and introduced me to so-and-so...” Clients were flush with stories of people who read their LinkedIn announcement and contacted them...parents of children’s friends who reached out to offer support and introductions...alma maters that stepped in and invited engagement or new connections...those who preceded them in transition, remembering what they went through, reaching out and offering entry into a next-phase-of-life they didn’t know existed.

My clients’ Part-Two stories demonstrate two essential components of the “Disappointment Equation”: expectation and reality. Their stories were rich with how reality surpassed their expectations—and what a gift that was. It reinforced the importance of community, of helping one another, not because it was “our job” to help others, but because we can. Each of us is part of networks, ideas, and relationships that can be, and are, helpful—especially when our networks include others who are accomplished in transition.

So, while we need to temper our expectations, we also need to influence reality by accessing the ordinary around us—and not expecting/relying (solely) on those who we think might save the day. Most people in career transitions don’t need “saving”; they simply need networks, ideas, relationships, and possibilities. They need quiet voices that remind them of their incredible value and of the big world around them, full of need and opportunity. They need people to reach out, make contact, be present, and help. We can each be that person for others and make reality much better than expectations.

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