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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>How to Disappoint</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authors(s)</strong></td>
<td>Clancy, Annette</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Publication date</strong></td>
<td>2018-04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication information</strong></td>
<td>Accountancy Ireland, 50 (2): 71-71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Chartered Accountants Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record/more information</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9707">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/9707</a></td>
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How to disappoint

The tyranny of satisfaction has reached crisis levels, but what if we could learn to disappoint?

BY DR ANNETTE CLANCY

I begin many of my lectures by telling students that I hope to disappoint them. I look forward to the moment they realise I have failed to live up to their expectations of me. They are not happy at the prospect. What do I mean I will disappoint? Have they spent large amounts of money to attend a lecture by someone who isn’t going to deliver on their expectations? Most of us will never live up to the expectations of others (or theirs of us). We will rarely be able to guarantee 100% success. Yet we are plagued with the curse of satisfaction. Organisational members who exceed targets by 10% this quarter are rarely cheered on and told to take it easy for the next quarter. Next quarter’s target increases by 10%, and this becomes the new normal.

Disappointment is the moment at which the fantasy of ‘what we should to be’ meets the reality of ‘what we are’. It is also a clue to the systemic conditions in which those conditions are generated. What if the best we could do is the best we can do? What if we could learn to disappoint?

Listen to disappointment
Disappointment is an invitation to reimagine attainable and realistic goals and targets. Instead of ignoring or relegating it, pay attention. Identify unrealistic expectations, discuss them, re-articulate them as more realistic goals that are attainable and achievable.

Acknowledge the fear
Disappointment is always connected to some ideal version of the future (an ideal lecturer who will ensure we get top marks; being available to clients/customers 24/7 etc.) What is it we are afraid of losing if we let go of that ideal? In bringing the fantasy into reality, it is possible to relinquish attachment to its power and reimagine a future that is achievable and more realistic. Perhaps the new version of us is a company that delivers the best service we possibly can rather than the idealised service we never could.

Articulate expectations
Organisations get stuck in blame/shame dynamics. Locating blame in other departments or feeling the shame of being the disappointing team member who let the team down during a presentation. This dynamic is a toxic mix that further relegates disappointment to the edges of organisational systems. Instead of trying to figure out who is right and who is wrong, try asking ‘what unarticulated expectations have resulted in this dynamic?’ Very often blame and shame relate to idealised expectations that have never been thought through or articulated. By examining these dynamics, it is possible to alleviate potentially intractable conflicts.

Figure out what really matters to your staff
Disappointment is a very common emotion that rarely receives attention in organisations. Asking people about their disappointments at work is a valuable way of finding out what really matters to people. Very often we don’t know what matters to us until we don’t have it.

The tyranny of satisfaction is built on the assumption that we can fulfil unrealistic fantasies and ideals. Disappointment tells us that this isn’t so. It also tells us that it is possible to reimagine our expectations as more reasonable and achievable aims. To do that, we must be ‘good enough’. Once those around us are comfortable with that promise, we can get on with the messy and ordinary task of working together.

In those conditions, we will often exceed expectations and will rarely blame each other for failing to live up to imaginary standards beyond the realm of reality.

DR ANNETTE CLANCY
Annette is a Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at University College Dublin and ran her own consultancy practice for over 17 years prior to joining UCD.