

# Inspect What You Expect

It's not enough to just assign the task

By Preston Ingalls



**W**hen you request a task to be performed, you naturally expect it to be completed. We make assignments and depend on them being completed in a timely manner.

Most times they are and therefore, we have an excellent occasion to reinforce behavior and performance.

## IT HAS BEEN COMPLETED

If the task has been completed, it provides us with an opportunity to give feedback on the tasks and reinforcement, through recognition, for its completion.

Reinforce completion with comments like:

- “Larry, thanks for getting that done on time.”
- “Linda, I appreciate the determination you had to complete this by the deadline. I recognize the effort it took.”

- “Dave, good job completing it. Now here are some suggestions the next time you do it that would improve the process.”
- “Ralph, thanks for the effort. I do want to discuss the excess costs involved with its completion.”

## IT HAS NOT BEEN COMPLETED

If the task has not been completed, for a variety of reasons (or excuses), it gives you a chance to “realign” their efforts. People may put off or procrastinate for many reasons. After all, doing something requires far more effort than not doing it. They may feel anxiety at performing the tasks; it may be an unpleasant task, or they are unsure as to its priority. Another reason may be the lack of self-confidence in performing the task. Or it should be sheer laziness. For whatever reason, by not performing the task immediately, people seek the path of least resistance or least discomfort. Psychoanalysts call this “resistance.” Resistance is natural

but has to be overcome to accomplish our assignments.

While employees may have the drive and passion to do the right thing and please the boss, it is possible for resistance and procrastination to get in the way. In fact, Elishia Goldstein's research ([www.mindful.org/the-neuroscience-of-resistance-and-how-to-overcome-it](http://www.mindful.org/the-neuroscience-of-resistance-and-how-to-overcome-it)) suggests that resistance is naturally ingrained in our brains, and because we give into it so much, it becomes habitual or instinctive.

Therefore, as a leader, your job is to get your people to move in a direction and perform in a manner they would not have done on their own. If they would have done it on their own, they wouldn't need a leader.

People will inherently resist performing certain work, but the mission requires those activities and assignments to be done and done on time. So, one of our roles, as leaders, is to ensure task completion by *following-up and following-through*.

The first thing you must do is trigger a reminder to follow up on an assignment. That means remind yourself to do a follow-up. A simple calendar entry “Chk w/Carol on report status” or “FF w/Leo on PD pump install” on a date with appropriate lead time for them to take action, if not completed. An Outlook task is a good reminder to perform your follow-up. Personally, I use the “FF” as a flag to indicate it is a follow-up and follow-through task.

Don't wait until it's due to do the follow-up; you want to allow some time for them to act on it if incomplete. Remember, they may have gotten busy and forgot or have simply put off doing it.

There are many reasons we conduct the follow-up when it has

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not been completed. It gives us the opportunity to:

- Reinforce the importance of the assignment and its deadline
- Provide goal clarification (the outcome or end state)
- Determine why it has not been completed
- Surface and address obstacles that prevented completion
- Remove any positive consequences for poor performance
- Find out and address personal issues that may restrict performance
- Discover if they need additional instruction to perform the task(s)
- Reemphasize the values of the organization; focus on results, not words
- Deliver negative consequences for poor performance

Reinforce non-completion with statements like:

- “Tyler, we are behind on this. I need to understand why we aren’t further along.”
- “Meg, I appreciate the work you have done so far but at this rate we won’t be able to hit the deadline of the 15th. What do we need to do to get this back on track?”
- “Chuck, I asked you to clean up your company vehicle last week and I haven’t seen any progress. Help me to understand why you haven’t done this.”
- “Bill, I am disappointed you haven’t started this yet. Help me to understand why and what we can do to get this done?”
- “Jim, maybe I didn’t clarify the importance of this project when I gave it to you two weeks ago. Let’s revisit why it has to be done and why it is so important that we hit the date.”
- “Jose, we had agreed you would get this done by Friday, and it seems you haven’t. The last time I checked in with you, you reassured me that you were on track. This is totally unacceptable and before I take action, I need to hear your reasons.”

## CONCLUSION

Do not take it personally if they have not completed the task. It is not a

personal affront to you. They were dealing with those natural forces of resistance to perform the task, and the procrastination side to resist won out over the drive side to perform it. Now your job is to make the drive side stronger. Remember, the failure to follow up may inadvertently send a message that it wasn’t important

because you never checked back. Employees may gauge the importance of tasks based on the supervisor’s passion to check on its completion.

That is why there is no substitute for follow-up and follow-through. It is not enough just to assign the task ... you have to *inspect what you expect*. ■



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