The Unwritten Expectations Checklist

Young professionals are often capable and motivated, but many struggle at work for a simple reason: **key expectations are rarely made explicit.**

Managers may assume certain behaviors are obvious. Employees may assume they're doing fine until they're told otherwise—often after frustration has already built.

This checklist makes common, unwritten workplace expectations visible so they can be discussed, aligned, and practiced early.

How to Use This Checklist

This tool can be used:

- During onboarding
- In a 1:1 conversation
- When resetting expectations
- As a self-check for young professionals

The goal is not to overwhelm.
The goal is **clarity**.

You don't need to address everything at once. Start with the areas that cause the most friction.

1. Communication Expectations

Unspoken expectations often exist around *how*, *when*, and *how much* to communicate.

Clarify expectations around:

- Response time during work hours
- When updates are expected (not just when asked)
- What level of detail is appropriate
- Tone in written communication
- How to flag issues or delays

Common disconnect:
Employees wait until there's a problem. Managers expect early signals.

Make it explicit:
"What should I know early—even if it feels small?"

2. Time Management & Deadlines

Deadlines often carry expectations beyond the due date itself.

Clarify expectations around:

- What "on time" actually means
- When to ask for more time
- How progress should be communicated
- How to prioritize when everything feels urgent

Common disconnect:
Employees focus on completing the task. Managers focus on predictability.

Make it explicit:
"If something might be late, when should I hear about it?"

3. Initiative

Initiative is one of the most misunderstood expectations in early careers.

Clarify expectations around:

- What proactive looks like in this role
- When to act independently vs. check in
- What decisions employees can make on their own
- What updates reduce surprises

Common disconnect:
Employees fear overstepping. Managers expect anticipation.

Make it explicit:
"What decisions can I make without approval—and what should I flag first?"

4. Feedback

Many employees want feedback but aren't sure how to receive or apply it.

Clarify expectations around:

- How feedback will be delivered
- What a productive response looks like
- Whether feedback is directional or corrective
- How quickly changes are expected

Common disconnect:
Employees explain or defend. Managers look for adjustment.

Make it explicit:
"What does applying feedback look like in practice?"

5. Professional Boundaries

Professionalism often shows up in small, daily behaviors.

Clarify expectations around:

- Phone use during work hours
- Availability and responsiveness
- Meeting preparation
- Work vs. personal boundaries
- How priorities shift during busy periods

Common disconnect:
Employees mirror school or peer norms. Managers expect workplace norms.

Make it explicit:
"What behaviors signal professionalism in this environment?"

Closing: Why This Matters

When expectations remain unwritten:

- Feedback becomes repetitive
- Frustration builds on both sides
- Performance conversations get harder than necessary

When expectations are explicit:

- Employees adjust faster
- Managers spend less time correcting basics
- Trust grows earlier

Clarity doesn't lower standards.
It makes standards reachable.

Developed by The Center for Young Professionals to support early-career workplace readiness through applied, behavior-based coaching.