A Manner of Speaking

A sure way to capture someone’s attention is to exceed their expectations.

It was a sewing machine mechanic who started this train of thought. His enthusiasm for his work, his demonstrated knowledge and reassurance were all welcome — but all within the realm of what I hoped for. His quoted rate was also what I expected; but when he told me the job would be done the next day, rather than in the three week period I anticipated, that’s when he really captured my attention. It was also the moment that I became his customer for life.

We go through our days expecting things to go a certain way, and they usually do. As we kind of trundle along, we don’t notice the expected; it’s the serendipity, the unexpected, that stops us short — and for a time our attention is riveted. My dad likes to surprise people in this way: They ask, “How are you?” automatically, always expecting the answer, “Fine” and not really hearing any response at all. Dad replies enthusiastically, “Terrific! I’m just having a great day.” His response is the one people hear. They look at him with surprise, perhaps envy, sometimes maybe even annoyance; but he definitely has their attention.

In the moment of delight and surprise that comes with exceeding expectations, there is an opportunity for us to build on that strong positive response and really connect with another person.

In one of the larger child care centers I visited recently, the director seemed to know all of the parents by name and immediate need. Impressed, I accompanied her through the halls of her program as she greeted each parent by name and then made reference to some recent family event or remarked on the experience or accomplishment of their child. Delight brightened their faces. She had exceeded their expectations.

They had a right to expect her to know their names and to match them with their child. They had a right to expect her to know what was happening for their child. But her obvious concern for them as people and the specificity of her knowledge blew them away. She captured their attention and their undying loyalty.

Often when directors and teachers are discussing relationships with parents, they spend some time griping about parent expectations. “They expect us to do everything for their child!” “Don’t they understand that we might have had a hard day at work, too?” “Why should we be expected to make up for all the stress in their lives?”

No doubt parents do often, maybe even usually, expect too much. But the flip side — expecting too little — doesn’t seem ideal either. It is impossible to meet expectations constantly, but some expectations can be exceeded. And therein lies the opportunity to solidify our relationship.

Have staff develop a list of “What parents expect of us,” then divide the list into realistic and unrealistic expectations. Celebrate the expectations you meet. Then look for expectations that can be exceeded — and allow yourselves to fantasize what might happen if . . . Another idea would be to develop a list of “What we expect of parents,” and again divide the list. What expectations are unrealistic? Why? How do they exceed our expectations? And how does that make us feel?

We can all learn to seize the moments when, with a little thought and effort, we can connect with someone in a way they will never forget.

Expectations are a powerful force in our world. Consider this comment overheard on parent night at a middle school: “The kids drive you crazy all day, then, at an event like this, you look at their parents and you think, ‘Well, no wonder . . .’”

Bonnie Neugebauer, September 1991