

# When People Let You Down

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



Have you ever depended on someone else and they let you down? Maybe they said they would do something and they didn't. Or they didn't get it done on time. Or you didn't get paid. Maybe they said they would support you or help you and they did the opposite—they ignored or betrayed you. For example, you hired a plumber to replace your faucet and instead he flooded your kitchen. Or your employee underperformed on an agreed-upon expectation.

If you're more than a couple of days old, you've experienced disappointment in others. You can't live life without depending on other people and dealing with their shortcomings. There are no exceptions. This applies to family, friends, employees, doctors, repair technicians, and everyone who has influence in your life.

We depend on people despite knowing that some are not trustworthy because even those who are trustworthy sometimes let us down. So why do we do depend on people? To state the obvious, we can't do everything ourselves. We can't know everything and when we delegate or hire someone, we can't question, watch, or inspect everything they do. We can't listen in to all conversations. We simply don't have the time, energy, resources, or money required to not depend on others.

Thankfully, most people give their best. They try to do what is expected of them and what has been agreed upon. However, people aren't perfect. There are also some who don't care. Regardless, whether people make mistakes due to carelessness, lack of knowledge, lack of ability, or other factors outside of their control, we will be disappointed in people on occasion. We will be hurt. We will be negatively impacted by what people do or don't do.

In our moments of frustration, we may try to remove our dependencies on others, but it is impossible long term. We may change out our employees or service providers. We may disassociate with family members or friends. We may replace our doctors or accountants. We may even divorce our spouses, but their replacements aren't perfect either. So, what should we do? Give up? Of course not, we don't have that choice. However, we have influence. We have abilities that can minimize the negative impacts others have on us.

The bad news though is that learning how to limit the negative impact others have on us could easily require reading a library of books and years of practice. There are large volumes like the [PMBOK](#) that project managers refer to when many people are being depended upon in large projects. The good news, though, is there are common-sense practices you can immediately adopt.

Shown below are four actions with specific practices listed within each that limit the conflict and negative impact others cause when they don't do what they say they will do. More fundamentally, these are proven practices that can help you achieve success. These are a combination of practices commonly used to manage projects, implement change initiatives, overcome conflict, and address employee underperformance. Use this list to assess the sources of any current disappointments you are experiencing or as a future checklist when it happens next:

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### 1. Assess the situation:

- a. Pause. Intercept any tendency to overreact and immediately fire, cancel, divorce, or replace people when they have not met expectations.
- b. Consider that your reactionary instinct may be biased if not completely wrong and that an opposite reaction might be better.
- c. Embrace a balanced view of people that includes compassion for whatever they might also be dealing with. Might this be an *opportunity* rather than a *problem*?
- d. Take responsibility for that which you influenced including any lack of clarity in what was agreed to—both what was said explicitly and not said.
- e. Objectively assess what they did or didn't do that was at odds with what was explicitly agreed to.
- f. Assess any other influences or circumstances, including your own influence, that contributed to their shortcoming.
- g. If you are a person of religious faith, ask God “What do you want me to know and do with this?”
- h. Identify all that has directly caused or contributed to the shortcoming.
- i. If the shortcoming or contributions to it aren't serious or a repeated offense, consider letting them go .... perhaps in the spirit of maintaining the relationship.

### 2. Engage the individual(s) responsible:

- a. If the shortcoming can't be overlooked, prepare for the discussion you will be having.
- b. Depending on the nature of the relationship, adopt a mindset with the appropriate level of assertiveness, respectfulness, tenderness, and self-control.
- c. Approach the conversation with curiosity, not judgement. Consider questions like: Are they aware of their contribution to the problem? Their impact? What was their motive? What else are they dealing with? Is the issue primarily in their control or should you talk to someone else?
- d. Start the conversation by fostering a spirit of cooperation. Talk about whatever was done well, common goals, and the value of the relationship.
- e. Discuss the situation, your observations, and the impacts of the shortcoming. Acknowledge contributing circumstances. Share motives and feelings. Allow a 2-way conversation without interruption.
- f. If possible, extend the conversation to uncover deeper root causes such as underlying fears, biases, beliefs, and desires. Most shortcomings are symptoms caused by more fundamental mindsets and circumstances.
- g. Agree on the shortcoming, contributing circumstances, and root causes. As much as possible, agree on responsibilities for that which caused the shortcoming without blame shifting.
- h. Explore solutions, including compromises, for what needs to be done to address the shortcoming, contributing circumstances, and root causes. Agree on a remedy for the immediate problem.
- i. If future work or collaboration is intended, discuss and agree on a longer-term plan to ensure future expectations are met.

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### 3. If there is future collaboration or work intended:

- a. Maintain good relationships with the individuals involved. Don't over-rely on technology such as email, texting, phone calls, or video calls to maintain the relationships.
- b. If possible, offer to help. Any generosity you give demonstrates your interest in investing in a two-way relationship and fosters a spirit of cooperation.

### 4. When the next need arises:

- a. Discuss and agree on the “why”. Ensure they understand, appreciate, and buy into the problem or need to be addressed.
- b. Discuss and agree on the “what”. Ensure they contribute to, understand, and agree with the solution that has been crafted that solves the problem and addresses the need.
- c. Agree on the “how”. Ensure the implementation details are discussed and understood. Don't leave important details to chance. Define roles, responsibilities, budgets, priorities, timelines, how progress will be tracked, and the definition of done. Be as specific as necessary.
- d. Assess the difficulty, risk, and level of change required to determine if any additional actions or resources are needed to ensure success.
- e. Confirm the expectations that were agreed upon. If appropriate, clearly document the why, what, and how. Distribute what was agreed upon to those doing the work as well as those impacted by the work.
- f. Put in place whatever additional resources and actions might be needed to help ensure success. Try to minimize any inconveniences and help overcome any obstacles within your influence.
- g. If the work is a project or ongoing responsibility in contrast to a simple task, agree on how progress will be measured and tracked.
- h. Track progress. Increase the frequency and depth of follow-ups when risks are high or there is a likelihood of underperformance. Provide ongoing support and coaching.
- i. Agree to appropriate consequences—both reinforcing and correcting. Outline any boundaries or constraints to be applied.
- j. Enforce the consequences. Recognize good progress and compliment desirable behaviors. Alternatively, address any lack of progress or undesirable behaviors.
- k. Discuss and agree on remedies that get progress back on track.

Best of luck in getting your needs addressed and work back on track.

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