How to Lead Leaders



Set expectations early, or they will be set for you.

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At Scribe, we work with numerous ultra-successful individuals who are used to running and controlling things in their lives. They give directions, and people follow their lead. But what happens when those people start writing their book — something they have no experience doing?

We've seen what happens. If we don't provide them with firm and direct leadership, our authors will step in with their own leadership. They will try to control the book-writing process because being in control is comfortable for them. What we care about most is making sure they write a book that they are proud of. Being comfortable won't get them a great book.

99.9 percent of our authors don’t know what writing and publishing a great book entails – which is great, that’s why we exist. But letting them take control of the process – which they do, if we don’t set clear expectations – is a recipe for disaster.

Once we realized that, we came to the conclusion that the author-facing members of our Tribe did not lead our authors well enough. How we fixed our expectation setting process provides a valuable lesson for any company that leads leaders.

When is it too late to set expectations?

One of our Tribe members practically ran out of her office toward my desk, “JT, we need you. We can’t get this author to publish her book.”

I’d seen this happen before. One of our authors was facing some understandable last-minute nerves. It’s never easy to put your ideas into the world.

“Why won’t she publish?” I asked.

“She wants a new cover, but we’re supposed to publish in two weeks,” she replied

“Okay, let me ask you this. Did anyone set the expectation that we can’t make a new cover this late in the process?” I said.

She avoided my eyes. That was the only answer I needed.

I thought back to the other times I joined projects to help authors publish their books. I realized in that moment that there was one clear issue with all of them and knew exactly what we needed to do in that moment.

Being a good sherpa

Imagine you just dropped $80,000 to climb Mt. Everest. You

hired a team of sherpas and rented all the equipment you need to be successful. You've done some hiking before, and you've gone up other mountains, but this is new territory for you.

This is the biggest mountain you will ever climb.

You want leadership and guidance as you climb up the icy slopes. You want your sherpas to clearly communicate when you'll reach your next camp. You want them to encourage you and tell you where you're doing well and where you're faltering. And when you approach an icefall that will require extreme concentration and mental capacity from you, you want them to set that expectation well ahead of time.

That icefall comes at the same point in the journey every time. There's no excuse for your sherpas to say, "Oh yeah, we're coming up to the most dangerous part of your journey in 15 minutes. People die up here all the time, so be careful."

You'd panic, and rightfully so.

Now imagine they said, "We're coming up to the most dangerous part of your journey and *you're going to lead the way*."

Frankly, I'm not climbing Mt. Everest either way, but if someone said that? Hell no! I'd be off that mountain so fast I'd cause an avalanche.

Instead of leaving you in the dark and forcing you to lead the way, you want your sherpa to set expectations repeatedly from the moment you sign up for the climb – that's how they display leadership.

"On one of your first days of climbing," the good sherpa says, "we'll spend hours ascending a dangerous icefall. It is one of the deadliest spots on the planet. Don't worry, though. We've done this a thousand times before and everyone we lead gets across safely. Just be ready to give it all of your focus and concentration and you'll be just fine."

In that case, you feel safer and more confident, even if you're still a bit nervous.

You know you're in the hands of a professional, and you know you'll have to give this upcoming section of the journey everything you've got.

When faced with that request for a last-minute cover design, I realized in that moment how we needed to lead and set expectations for our authors – just like a good sherpa helping people climb Mt. Everest.

It's our responsibility to tell them exactly what's coming next and to set those expectations early and often. For example, "once you lock your cover, we cannot make revisions without putting your project at risk."

Setting expectations for what obstacles and successes lie ahead for our authors – and the work they'll have to do to reach their ultimate goal – not only gets them a better book, but it makes their journey much more enjoyable.

They'll reach the deadly icefall and say, "This is it? I was expecting something dangerous."

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How did we improve our expectation setting?

Every week, our author-facing Tribe members meet to discuss challenges they're facing with authors.

One trend has been strikingly clear in every meeting so far: almost every challenge with an author has been a result of us not setting clear expectations:

If an author wanted a title that would make them look bad, their writer didn't lead them firmly enough in another direction. If an author felt nickel-and-dimed for paying an extra research fee, it was because the publishing manager

didn’t adequately lay out the budget that was available. If an author wanted to change their cover at the last minute, it was because no one told them they couldn’t.

And now, after going through challenging situations together every week, all of our author-facing Tribe members needed to set clear expectations too. Even the Tribe member whose author asked for a new cover two weeks before publication.

“Tell you what,” I said. “I’m not coming onto this project. If our Author wants a new cover, let her know that we can absolutely do that for her. But I’ve seen that cover—it’s one of the best ones we’ve done in a long time. Tell her I said that. If she still wants a new cover, just set two clear expectations: it will cost her more money, and it will delay her release date.”

She nodded, and I could tell she understood. She got back on the phone with the author, and after reinforcing that her cover was already fantastic, and setting those clear expectations, the author gave up the idea of changing her cover. She finished her journey happy and on time, with a great book.

That’s how we lead leaders: by setting clear expectations and guiding them through obstacles. Do the same thing, and you’ll lead your clients happily and safely to their summit.

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