Trust, but Set Expectations

Idea In Short

Complete the proverb before applying it: set expectations, then trust, then verify. Communicate the what and why, walk the site in person, write everything down and structure incentives around satisfaction. Even smart, trustworthy people let you down when success was never defined.

A Proverb With a Missing Half

Trust, but verify is a Russian proverb that President Ronald Reagan learned and used frequently when discussing nuclear arms reduction with the Soviet Union, and it earns regular use in business life too, where good comedic timing makes it land twice as well.1 Trust people, and do not be so naive as to trust them entirely. The worldview fits consulting, a privilege of working among motivated, smart, resourceful and prideful professionals who hustle to get things right. Then one weekend, the proverb fails, and the failure teaches what the saying leaves out.

The Sod Disaster

The humbling arrived through real estate. A vendor, used twice before, was hired to install new sod in the backyard of a rental property, given high-level instructions and trusted to deliver. The result was a disaster in three parts: two kinds of sod, one yellow and dried out; not enough sod, visibly running out in a corner; and, to compensate, mulch beds inflated to seven feet wide with no bushes to justify them. The trust-but-verify approach proved too Pollyanna, because expectations were never clear enough. The unwinding consumed 48 hours of calls and messages, a return visit was negotiated and everyone lost: the vendor will likely lose money on the round-two work, the damage to the schedule is done and the odds of future business are low to none. Lose-lose, purchased by skipping one conversation.

Why Consultants Should Care

Consultants are vendors, and every purchase of services carries this same margin for error. The failures are rarely this photogenic, and lawsuits against consultants are not rare, which makes the lessons transferable at full strength. The first lesson is setting expectations, because people differ in education, upbringing, experience, motivation and situational pressure, and nobody comes to work planning to do a crappy job; what they consider acceptable simply may not match what the client expects. Getting ahead of the problem means communicating the what and the why, meeting in person and walking the site, the gemba discipline of going where the action is, refusing the laziness that skips relationship-building and structuring incentives properly, such as paying most upon 80 percent completion and the balance upon satisfaction.2

Get It on Paper

The second lesson is documentation, because people forget. The joke that carries the truth: if it is not written down in email or text, I will deny we ever had this conversation. Consultants formalize this as the statement of work, and while a lawn project does not need contract-grade paper, text messages and phone calls only go so far. The practices scale down gracefully: meet with the vendor and write things down, even simple meeting minutes; solicit a few bids, exactly as clients put even favorite consultants through a request for proposal; and break out deliverables, activities and milestones in enough detail that both sides can point to the same definition of done.3

Build Trust, Let It Be Earned

The relationship half of the ledger still matters, and it is the part most people enjoy. Take the high road and show vendors you want them to succeed, painting a vision of future work together, putting a human voice to the name and getting them excited: let's do a good job here so we can do more later, here is what I am trying to accomplish and why, and can I get lunch for you and your crew? Generosity, though, must be paired with patience. Let people earn trust rather than granting it wholesale, because two adequate prior jobs justified confidence, not blank-check instructions. Ease into vendor relationships and let vendors earn the business, since rushing in resembles the kid discussing marriage on a first date. Warmth and diligence are not opposites; they are the two hands of the same professional.

The Expectations Conversation, Scripted

The missing conversation has a repeatable shape worth writing down. Describe the outcome in the vendor's terms, not yours, and ask them to play it back, because agreement with your words is cheaper than understanding of your intent. Walk the specifics together: which materials, what quantities, which edges and what happens when something runs short, since the sod ran out precisely where no contingency was discussed. Name the checkpoints in advance, a mid-job photo or walkthrough, converting verification from an insult into a scheduled step. Agree on the change protocol, meaning what the vendor does when reality diverges from plan, because improvised compensation produced the seven-foot mulch beds. And close by asking what could go wrong from their side, which surfaces the constraints they were not going to volunteer. Fifteen minutes of this script would have saved the weekend, and it scales unchanged from lawns to statements of work.

The Corrected Formula

The repaired proverb now reads: set expectations, then trust, then verify. Even smart, trustworthy people will let you down if they are unclear on what success looks like, so draw it out, write it down and be specific before extending the trust that makes work pleasant and the verification that keeps it honest. The backyard eventually recovered. The formula, corrected, has not failed since.

- 1Trust, but verify
- 2Gemba
- 3Request for proposal

Summary

A botched backyard delivers the consulting lesson: trust-but-verify fails without expectations set first. Meet at the gemba, get it on paper, build the relationship, let trust be earned gradually and define what success looks like specifically. Then trust. Then verify.