



American Expression E2751 Raise the bar

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

“Raise the bar” is a common English expression meaning to increase standards, expectations, or the level of performance required. When someone raises the bar, that person makes a task, goal, or standard more challenging than it was before. The expression is usually positive because it suggests improvement, ambition, and progress. For example, if a company improves the quality of its customer service, people may say that the company has raised the bar for its competitors in the industry.

The expression comes from sports, especially events such as the high jump and pole vault. In these competitions, athletes must jump over a horizontal bar. After successful jumps, the bar is physically raised, making the next attempt more difficult. An athlete who wants to continue competing must therefore jump higher. This physical action became a useful metaphor for increasing standards in other areas of life. Today, the phrase is commonly used in business, education, sports, technology, entertainment, and personal development.

In the workplace, “raise the bar” often describes efforts to improve performance or quality. Suppose a manager expects employees to answer customer inquiries within twenty-four hours. Later, the company introduces a system requiring responses within twelve hours. The company has raised the bar for customer service. Similarly, an employee who consistently produces excellent work may raise the bar for colleagues because that person demonstrates that a higher level of performance is possible and achievable.

The phrase is also frequently used in education. A teacher may raise the bar by giving students more challenging assignments or expecting deeper analysis. This does not necessarily mean making education unnecessarily difficult. Ideally, raising the bar means encouraging people to develop their abilities instead of remaining satisfied with minimum requirements. A student might also raise the bar personally by deciding that simply passing an examination is no longer enough and aiming for an excellent score instead.

“Raise the bar” can describe innovation as well. When a new product offers better performance, convenience, safety, or design than previous products, people may say it raises the bar for the entire industry. Competitors then feel pressure to improve their own products. In this sense, raising the bar can stimulate competition and progress. One organization’s achievement can establish a new benchmark that others try to reach or surpass, ultimately benefiting customers and encouraging further innovation.

There are several natural ways to use the expression. You might say, “Her presentation really raised the bar for the rest of us,” meaning that her excellent presentation established a higher standard. A manager could say, “We need to raise the bar on customer satisfaction,” meaning that better results are expected. The opposite idea is “lower the bar,” which means reducing standards or expectations. If requirements become easier to satisfy, someone may complain that the organization is lowering the bar.

In conclusion, “raise the bar” means to establish higher standards, demand better performance, or challenge yourself or others to achieve more. Its origin in jumping sports makes the metaphor easy to understand: as the physical bar moves higher, greater effort and ability are required to clear it. In everyday English, the phrase communicates ambition and continuous improvement. Whether discussing employees, students, athletes, companies, or personal goals, raising the bar means refusing to remain at the current level and deliberately aiming for something better, higher, and more demanding.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does “raise the bar” mean, and when would you use this expression?
2. Can you describe a situation where someone raised the bar at work or school?
3. How can raising the bar help people improve their skills and performance?
4. Can raising the bar sometimes create too much pressure? Why or why not?
5. In what area of your life would you like to raise the bar, and how would you do it?