

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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This article explores the concept behind the self-fulfilling prophecy, defines and illustrates these key principles, then suggests ways in which managers and teachers can use the concept to improve the performance of those they are charged with.

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THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

BETTER MANAGEMENT BY PERCEPTION



One of the most powerful tools for influencing the performance of others is your own expectations

INTRODUCTION

In 1911 two researchers with the unlikely names of Stumpt and Pfungst began an investigation of an even more unlikely horse named Clever Hans. The unlikely thing about Hans was that he could add, subtract, multiply, divide, spell and solve problems involving musical harmony. Any number of animals had been taught to perform such tricks before, but they all had to be cued by their trainers.

The really clever thing about Clever Hans was that he could run through his repertoire even when his owner a German mathematician named Von Osten, was not present. The horse would answer questions for anyone. Von Osten swore he was mystified by the whole thing.

In 'Teachers and the Learning Process' (Prentice-Hall, 1971), Robert Strom describes what Stumpt and Pfungst learned. *"Among the first discoveries made was that if the horse could not see the questioner, Hans was not clever at all. Similarly, if the questioner did not himself know the answer to the question, Hans could not answer it either... A forward inclination of the head of the questioner would start Hans tapping, Pfungst observed... as the experimenter straightened up, Hans would stop tapping he found that even the raising of his eyebrows was sufficient. Even the dilation of the questioner's nostrils was a cue for Hans to stop tapping."*

In other words, unwittingly, people were giving the horse the correct answers by communicating their expectations to him via physical signals. Hans was able to pick up on those signals even subtle ones. He was clever only when people expected him to be!

A management concept

As it is known and taught today in management and education circles, the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy was conceptualized by Robert Merton a professor of sociology at Columbia University. In a 1957 work called 'Social Theory and Social Structure', Merton said the phenomenon occurs when *"a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true."*

Aims of this Article

1. Explore the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy (or Pygmalion Effect as it is also known.)
2. Define the key principles of the self-fulfilling prophecy.
3. Illustrate these principles with a number of corollaries to support the basic principles.
4. Suggest ways by which teachers and managers can influence the success of pupils and subordinates.

How managers communicate expectations

- Seating low–expectation employees in low-prestige office areas far from the manager
- Paying less attention to lows in business situations (smiling less often and maintaining less eye contact)
- Giving them less information about what’s going on in the department
- Calling on lows less often to work on special projects, state their opinions, or give presentations
- Waiting less time for lows to state their opinions
- Not staying with lows in failure situations (i.e. providing less help or giving less advice when subordinates really need it)
- Criticizing lows more frequently than highs for making mistakes
- Praising lows less frequently than highs after successful efforts
- Praising lows more frequently than highs for marginal or inadequate effort
- Providing lows with less accurate and less detailed feedback on job performance than highs
- Failing to provide lows with feedback about their job performance as often as highs
- Demanding less work and effort from lows than from highs
- Interrupting lows more

In other words, once an expectation is set, even if it isn’t accurate, we tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation. Surprisingly often, the result is that the expectation, as if by magic, comes true.

An ancient myth

Magic certainly was involved in the ancient myth from which the idea of the self–fulfilling prophecy takes its other common name. As Ovid told the story in the tenth book of *Metamorphoses*, the sculptor Pygmalion, a prince of Cyprus, sought to create an ivory statue of the ideal woman.

The result which he named Galatea was so beautiful that Pygmalion fell desperately in love with his own creation. He prayed to the goddess Venus to bring Galatea to life. Venus granted his prayer and the couple lived happily ever after.

A modern update

That’s where the name originated but a better illustration of the Pygmalion Effect is George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*, in which Professor Henry Higgins insists that he can take a Cockney flower girl and, with some vigorous training, pass her off as a duchess. He succeeds. But a key point lies in a comment by the trainee, Eliza Doolittle, to Higgins’ friend Pickering:

“You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she’s treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will, but I know I can be a lady to you because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.”

The bottom line?

Consciously or not we tip people off as to what our expectations are. We exhibit thousands of cues, some as subtle as the tilting of heads, the raising of eye brows or the dilation of nostrils, but most are much more obvious. And people pick up on those cues.

KEY PRINCIPLES

The concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy can be summarized in these key principles:

- We form certain expectations of people or events
- We communicate those expectations with various cues
- People tend to respond to these cues by adjusting their behavior to match them
- The result is that the original expectation becomes true

This creates a circle of self–fulfilling prophecies.

Does it work?

A convincing body of behavioral research says it does.

In 1971 Robert Rosenthal, a professor of social psychology at Harvard, described an experiment in which he told a group of students that he had developed a strain of super-intelligent rats that could run mazes quickly. He then passed out perfectly normal rats at random, telling half of the students that they had the new “maze-bright” rats and the other half that they got “maze-dull” rats.

The rats believed to be bright improved daily in running the maze they ran faster and more accurately. The “dull” rats refused to budge from the starting point 29% of the time, while the “bright” rats refused only 11% of the time.

This experiment illustrates the first of a number of corollaries to our four basic principles.

COROLLARIES

Corollary 1

- High expectations lead to higher performance; low expectations lead to lower performance.

Rosenthal concluded that some students unknowingly communicated high expectations to the supposedly bright rats. The other students communicated low expectations to the supposedly dull ones. But this study went a step further.

According to Rosenthal, *“Those who believed they were working with intelligent animals liked them better and found them more pleasant. Such students said they felt more relaxed with the animals, they treated them more gently and were more enthusiastic about the experiment than the students who thought they had dull rats to work with.”*

Corollary 2

- Better performance resulting from high expectations leads us to like someone more
- Lower performance resulting from low expectations leads us to like someone less

Rats not good enough for you? In another classic experiment, Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson worked with elementary school children from 18 classrooms. They randomly chose 20% of the children from each room and told the teachers they were “intellectual bloomers.”

How teachers communicate expectations

- Seating low expectation students far from the teacher and/or seating them in a group
- Paying less attention to lows in academic situations (smiling less often, maintaining less eye contact, etc.)
- Calling on lows less often to answer questions or to make public demonstrations
- Waiting less time for lows to answer questions
- Not staying with lows in failure situations (e.g. providing fewer clues, asking fewer follow-up questions)
- Criticizing lows more frequently than highs for incorrect responses
- Praising lows less frequently than highs after successful responses
- Praising lows more frequently than highs for marginal or inadequate responses
- Providing lows with less accurate and less detailed feedback than highs
- Failing to provide lows with feedback about their responses as often as highs
- Demanding less work and effort from lows than from highs
- Interrupting lows more frequently than highs

They explained that these children could be expected to show remarkable gains during the year. The experimental children showed average IQ gains of two points in verbal ability, seven points in reasoning and four points in over all IQ. The “intellectual bloomers” really did bloom!

How can this possibly work? In ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom’ (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), Rosenthal replies: *“To summarize our speculations, we may say that by what she said, by how and when she said it, by her actual facial expressions, postures and perhaps by her touch, the teacher may have communicated to the children of the experimental group that she expected improved intellectual performance.”*

Such communication together with possible changes in teaching techniques may have helped the child learn by changing his self concept, his expectations of his own behavior, and his motivation, as well as his cognitive style and skills.”

There was no difference in the amount of time the teachers spent with the students. Evidently there was a difference in the quality of the interactions. The teachers also found the “bloomers” to be more appealing, more affectionate and better adjusted. Some students gained in IQ even though they had not been designated as “bloomers,” but they were not regarded to be as appealing, affectionate or well-adjusted.

Apparently, the bloomers had done what was expected of them and the teachers were comfortable with them. The other students who did well surprised the teachers; they did the unexpected and the teachers were not as comfortable with them. It may be that they were thought of as overstepping their bounds or labeled as troublemakers.

Corollary 3

- We tend to be comfortable with people who meet our expectations, whether they’re high or low
- We tend not to be comfortable with people who don’t meet our expectations, whether they are high or low

As for our expectations of what will happen or how someone will behave, we form them in a thousand ways, many preconceived. We all are prejudiced in the literal sense of the word; we ‘prejudge’ either positively or negatively.

We like to think we know what’s going to happen before it happens, and we don’t like to be proven wrong. We want to feel that we can control things.

The impulse has given rise to religion, which says we can influence the gods with prayer, magic, which says we can manipulate events with secret powers; and science, which says we can understand the logic behind events and use it to predict similar events.

Corollary 4

- Forming expectations is natural and unavoidable

The simple truth is that almost all of us behave pretty much according to the way we’re treated.

If you keep telling a teenager, for example, that he’s worthless, has no sense of right or wrong and isn’t going to amount to anything, he’ll probably respond accordingly.

If you keep telling him (sincerely) that he’s important to you that you have every confidence in his judgment as to what’s right or wrong and that you’re sure he’s going to be successful in whatever he decides to do, he’ll also tend to respond accordingly.

You transmit those expectations to him and he’ll begin to reflect the image you’ve created for him.

Corollary 5

- Once formed expectations about ourselves tend to be self-sustaining

Exactly how do we communicate the expectations responsible for the Pygmalion Effect? The process works in very similar ways with people as it did with Clever Hans.

In 'Educational Sociology: a realistic approach' (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), Thomas L. Good, Jere E. Brophy list a dozen ways in which teachers and managers may behave differently toward students and workers (see call outs on pages 2 and 3.)

Corollary 6

- Good managers produce employees who perform well and feel good about themselves
- Bad managers produce employees who perform poorly and feel badly about themselves

Pygmalion in Action

One of the critical tools a manager uses to influence employees is the performance review. Most managers underestimate its importance. Certainly the review is used as a report card, as a means of calculating the size of raises, as a way to introduce areas needing improvement and as a permanent record of what someone has accomplished.

Much more importantly, though, reviews influence future performance. They offer a good example of how self-fulfilling prophecies work, for good or ill.

Take the case of a bright, young, aggressive employee. Let's assume she is abrasive, disruptive and disrespectful at times. However, she can also be creative, hard-working and full of enthusiasm. Given proper channelling, she can produce excellent results.

Some managers, required to assign her to a performance category, would call her "excellent." They're impressed by her strengths. Others, focusing on her weaknesses, would call her "poor." Still others, weighing the pluses and minuses, would call her "average." Even with the scant information you have, you can see that any of these ratings could be justified.

But what these managers are doing probably unknowingly, is helping to determine the young woman's future performance. If she's rated "excellent," what will happen? She will tend to be even more abrasive, disruptive and disrespectful. She will also probably be more creative, enthusiastic and hard-working. She will do more of what she believes her manager wants.

What if she's rated "poor"? She will likely be less abrasive, but she will also be less creative and enthusiastic. Suppose she's rated "average." Depending on what her manager says about the rating and why she got it, she may adjust her behavior slightly.

The variable here is the manager's rating. It is based on the manager's values, prejudices and feelings. Most employees will take the cues and alter their future behavior accordingly.

Corollary 7

- Performance ratings don't just summarize the past, they help determine future performance

Communication

A manager cannot avoid communicating low expectations because the messages are often nonverbal and unintentional. As with observers communicating to Clever Hans and teachers communicating to students, managers nod their heads, prolong or shorten eye contact, express themselves in a certain tone of voice, etc.

Some managers refuse to admit they communicate negative expectations: *"I never said anything negative to him. I hardly spoke to him at all,"* (as if that doesn't send a powerful message.)

The key is not what managers say, but the way they behave.

Corollary 8

- The best managers have confidence in themselves and in their ability to hire, develop and motivate people; largely because of the self-confidence, they communicate high expectations to others.
- A manager increases or decreases initiative by the frequent or infrequent use of praise, criticism, feedback information, etc.

The manager, therefore, plays a highly significant role in the success or failure of an employee. The various ways in which teachers communicate expectations to students can be broken down into four general categories (Figure 1). The same categories suggest ways by which managers can influence the success of subordinates.

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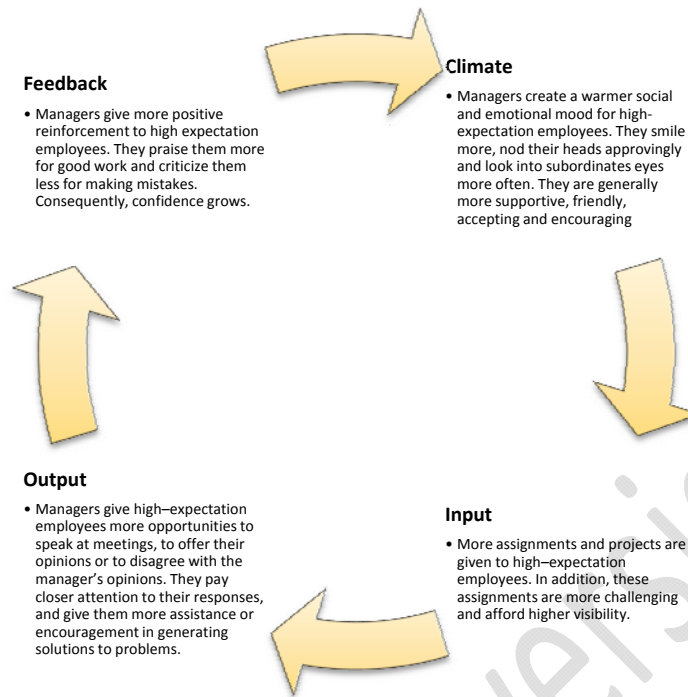


Figure 1: Process diagram when communicating expectations

Like the teacher with the student and the trainer with the trainee, the manager has a profound impact on the success or failure of the subordinate.

To quote Livingston once more, *“If he is unskilled, he leaves scars on the careers of the young men (and women), cuts deeply into their self-esteem and distorts their image of themselves as human beings. But if he is skilful and has high expectations of his subordinates, their self-confidence will grow, their capabilities will develop and their productivity will be high. More often than he realizes, the manager is Pygmalion.”*

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