



The Pygmalion Effect

How Leaders and Managers Can Create a
Virtuous Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

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Introduction

Pygmalion was a legendary figure from Cyprus. In Greek mythology, he was a sculptor who fell in love with the statue of a beautiful woman he created. His work was so fair and realistic that all other real women paled in comparison. He so wished her to be real that when he kissed the statue, its lips felt warm to him. Galatea, as he called the statue, was alive!

In essence, the *Pygmalion effect* is about the power of self-fulfilling prophecies, creating a virtuous cycle of positive expectations that affect those around you. If your expectations are negative and negative outcomes result, this is referred to as the *golem effect*.

The ancient myth of Pygmalion received an update when George Bernard Shaw wrote a play by the same name in which phonetics professor Henry Higgins takes it upon himself to attempt to improve the language and speech of Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower girl with a very strong Cockney accent. Higgins fully expects he can transform Eliza into a seemingly well-bred, well-spoken lady, and with persistence he succeeds. The play was further popularized into the well-known stage musical, *My Fair Lady*.

What's truly astounding is that these effects are documented by research. This white paper reviews the literature surrounding this phenomenon and equips you with strategies and tactics to leverage the Pygmalion effect for leadership and management success.

Expectations and Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

"High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation."

~ Charles Kettering, prolific inventor and former head of research for General Motors ~

Although the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy dates back to both ancient Greece and ancient India, in the 20th century it is

sociologist Robert K. Merton who is credited with coining the phrase.¹ In his 1948 article on the topic, he puts it this way:

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception comes *true*. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.

In other words, even though the expectation is false, believing in it can make it happen. This notion was eventually studied in detail in both the educational setting and the managerial setting. The first big study of the Pygmalion effect based on Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy theory was focused on the classroom setting as described by Rosenthal and Jacobson in their 1968 book.² One of the experiments they conducted was to tell a group of elementary school teachers how intelligence testing had revealed that some of their students were "late bloomers," but that they should expect them to blossom in the coming year. Those late-blooming children were actually chosen at random, but the same intelligence test administered at the end of year showed a substantial increase in the students' scores relative to a control group. And the teachers were completely unaware of having done anything differently with either group. It was their own *expectations* of better performance that became self-fulfilling prophecies.

The converse *golem effect* was not purposely reproduced in the classroom as no researcher wants to be held responsible for purposely causing decreased student achievement, but enough indirect evidence has been accumulated to confirm what has long been known anecdotally – if you constantly tell someone they are an underachiever, they will probably become one in a negative self-fulfilling prophecy scenario. Howard Zinn, the noted historian, author, playwright and social activist sums up this anecdotal evidence when he says, "Pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act."³

It wasn't long before the Pygmalion effect made its way into the workplace and employee performance. After all, managers are always looking for ways to get better performance out of their workers. This idea of harnessing the Pygmalion effect was intriguing to many.

Harvard School of Business professor J. Sterling Livingston highlighted the importance of the Pygmalion effect in management back in 1969 in the following ways⁴:

¹ Merton, R. K. (1948). The self-fulfilling prophecy. *Antioch Review*, 8(2), 193–210.

² Rosenthal, R., and Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*. New York: Hold, Reinhart & Winston.

³ Zinn, H. (1994). *You can't be neutral on a moving train: A personal history of our times*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁴ Livingston, J. S. (1969). Pygmalion in management. *Harvard Business Review*, 47(4), 81-89.

- What managers expect of subordinates and the way they treat them largely determine their performance and career progress.
- A unique characteristic of superior managers is the ability to create high performance expectations that subordinates fulfill.
- Less effective managers fail to develop similar expectations, and as a consequence, the productivity of their subordinates suffers.
- Subordinates, more often than not, appear to do what they believe they are expected to do.

In short, this can be summed up to mean that if you treat your subordinates as stars, they will work to fulfill that expectation. And this is where Henry Higgins succeeded in spite of himself, for he failed to treat Eliza like a lady nearly all of the time. She herself, eventually comes to recognize this in a conversation she has with Colonel Pickering, a somewhat reluctant partner in the experiment. Note Eliza's words:

"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 message here is surprisingly simple yet powerful: Treat people the way you want them to be in order to create a virtuous cycle of positive expectations that become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The Role of Beliefs in the Pygmalion Effect

Now think back to that first study by Rosenthal and Jacobson mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The teachers expected their late-blooming students to blossom that year and they did. But this was not a *conscious* expectation among the teachers – it was purposely planted by the researchers. This is significant because it means that part of what was important in the study is that the teachers *believed* their so-called late-bloomers would in fact blossom that year. It introduces a fascinating conundrum – will your expectations work if you don't really believe them? As a manager or leader, it is important to consider such questions as the following:

- Do I *believe* the intelligence and skills of my employees can really be improved with effort?
- Do I *believe* my employees want to make that effort?
- Do I *believe* that I am the kind of manager that inspires superior effort?

- How am I conveying my beliefs in my daily words and actions?

The value and impact of these reflections cannot be understated. Livingston describes this role of belief in one's own abilities as follows:

“What managers believe about themselves subtly influences what they believe about their subordinates, what they expect of them, and how they treat them. If they have confidence in their ability to develop and stimulate subordinates to high levels of performance, they will expect much of them and will treat them with confidence that their expectations will be met. But if they have doubts about their ability to stimulate subordinates, they will expect less of them and will treat them with less confidence.”

Thus, you may very well need to engage in your own personal development as a leader or manager in order to even be able to fully leverage the Pygmalion effect for success. This effect of believing in yourself also has a name, the *Galatea effect*, named after the statue that Pygmalion created in the Greek myth. Keep in mind that the Galatea effect also applies to your subordinates' beliefs in themselves.⁵

In fact, examining your own beliefs about your subordinates is an essential part of the leveraging the Pygmalion effect for business success. Here's how one author puts it⁶:

So, in your heart-of-hearts what do you really believe about your employees' potential? And very importantly, *what is the basis for your belief?* Too often our beliefs about a person or team are NOT based on fact. They are based on statements of others or on prejudices of which we might not be consciously aware (e.g., girls are not good at math). Examine the basis for your belief. If you discover that the basis for your belief is questionable, discard it!

Hitting the Sweet Spot of the Pygmalion Effect

It's important to realize that you can go too far with expectations. As Livingston noted in his 1969 article, “Subordinates will

⁵ Heathfield, S. M. (n.d.). The Galatea Effect: The power of self-expectations. *About Money*. Retrieved from http://humanresources.about.com/od/managementtips/a/mgmtsecret_2.htm

⁶ Sternberg, L. (2012). Are you leveraging the Pygmalion effect? *Leadership Laboratory*. Retrieved from <http://leadershiplaboratory.wordpress.com/2012/06/17/are-you-leveraging-the-pygmalion-effect/>

not be motivated to reach high levels of productivity unless they consider the boss's high expectations realistic and achievable." And this is borne out in various research studies as Livingston goes on to conclude, "It is therefore not surprising that failure of subordinates to meet the unrealistically high expectations of their managers leads to high rates of attrition, either voluntary or involuntary." This dovetails nicely with the whole notion of setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely) goals, with which you're probably already familiar. It is the "A" of smart that gets at this notion, although sometimes the "R" stands for *realistic*. Let this be your first important lesson in leveraging the Pygmalion effect for leadership and management success: Keep it realistic!

So what do you actually *do* to leverage the power of the Pygmalion effect for leadership and management success? One researcher suggests that a *Pygmalion Leadership Style* (PLS) has the following broad elements⁷:

"...it is hypothesized that these leader behaviors convey high expectations to subordinates and arouse high motivation and intensification of effort. PLS includes leader behavior that creates a supportive interpersonal climate, attributes subordinate success to stable, internal causes and their failures to ephemeral and external causes, and motivates subordinates by strengthening their self-efficacy."

That's pretty dense academic language for something pretty simple: Set high, but not too high, expectations and then *support* your people in improving themselves to meet that high bar. Keep it positive and don't emphasize failures. The same researcher states it differently in terms of the practical approach as follows⁸:

"The most practicable way for a leader to create (a self-fulfilling prophesy) willfully is to communicate high performance expectations to followers, in a way that augments their self-efficacy. Perceiving themselves to be capable and therefore expecting to succeed, followers mobilize their internal resources, including knowledge, skills, ability, resolve, patience, and stamina, for peak performance."

In terms of what this translates into for your daily practice as a leader or manager to create both Pygmalion and Galatea effects, do the following⁹:

⁷ Eden, D., Gelter, D., Gewirtz, A., Gordon-Terner, R., Inbar, I., Liberman, M., & ... Shalit, M. (2000). Implanting Pygmalion leadership style through workshop training: Seven field experiments. *Leadership Quarterly*, 11(2), 171-210.

⁸ Eden, D. (1992). Leadership and expectations: Pygmalion effects and other self-fulfilling prophecies in organizations. *Leadership Quarterly*, 3(4), 271-305.

⁹ Heathfield, S. M. (n.d.). The Galatea Effect: The power of self-expectations. *About Money*. Retrieved from http://humanresources.about.com/od/managementtips/a/mgmtsecret_2.htm

- Enable the employee to participate in potentially successful projects that bring continuous improvement to the workplace.
- Provide one-on-one coaching with the employee with emphasis on improving what the employee does well rather than focusing on the employee's weaknesses.
- Provide developmental opportunities that reflect what the employee is interested in learning.
- Assign a successful senior employee to play a developmental mentoring role with the employee.
- Hold frequent, positive verbal interactions with the employee and communicate consistently your firm belief in the employee's ability to perform the job. Keep feedback positive and developmental where possible.
- Make sure the employee is receiving consistent messages from other supervisory personnel. How you speak to others about employees powerfully molds their opinions.
- Project your *sincere* commitment to the employee's success and ongoing development.

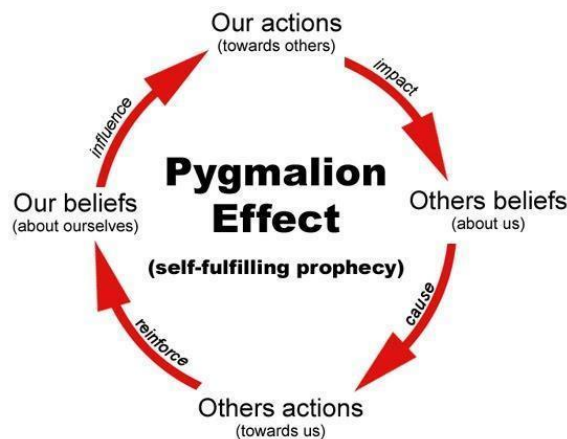
What is emerging here is a two-fold path that necessarily involves changes in both leaders/managers as well as subordinates. Leaders and managers must be developed and trained in how to set realistically high expectations as well as provide all the different forms of support to subordinates mentioned above. At the same time, subordinates must also be trained and developed in a way that puts them on a path of self-development that makes them open to whole notion of achieving higher standards. To leave either piece out of the equation can result in a derailed Pygmalion effect. Leaders and managers must believe in themselves and their subordinates, and subordinates must also believe in themselves, their leaders, and managers.

Four key areas to pay close attention to in creating Pygmalion effects are succinctly summarized ACCEL's *Better Management by Perception* resources¹⁰:

1. **Climate:** Managers create a warmer social and emotional mood for high-expectation employees. They smile more, nod their heads approvingly and look into subordinates eyes more often. They are generally more supportive, friendly, accepting and encouraging.
2. **Input:** More assignments and projects are given to high-expectation employees. In addition, these assignments are more challenging and afford higher visibility.
3. **Output:** Managers give high-expectation employees more opportunities to speak at meetings, to offer their opinions or to disagree with the manager's opinions. They pay closer attention to their responses and give them more assistance or encouragement in generating solutions to problems.
4. **Feedback:** Managers give more positive reinforcement to high expectation employees. They praise them more for good work and criticize them less for making mistakes. Consequently, confidence grows.

¹⁰ Retrieved from http://www.accel-team.com/pygmalion/prophecy_05.html

The above represents what managers tend to do with high-expectation employees, which makes it a great action plan for how you should treat *all* employees if you want to help them develop into star performers. Blogger Dave Kashen, on his Awesome Culture site, provides a graphic illustration of the virtuous cycle of the Pygmalion effect as seen below.¹¹



He also outlines some very specific strategies for using the Pygmalion effect to create high-performing teams, including the following:

- ***Seek to understand your team member's expectations about their own capabilities.*** Since your team member's effort and motivation is correlated to their expectations of their own capabilities, it's important to understand what those are (remember you don't want your expectations to be either too high or too low). Spend the time to get to know your people and understand how they view themselves and their potential.
- ***Be intentional in training your leaders and managers to leverage the Pygmalion effect.*** The research is there to support it, so proactively train your people to make the most of the Pygmalion effect. Pygmalion leadership training can be one of the most effective tools at your disposal in building high-performing teams.
- ***Hit the sweet spot of "stretch" goals.*** It's been mentioned several times in this paper that your expectations must be just right – not too high, not too low. But what does that translate into in terms of goal-setting? Encourage employees to set goals that they themselves believe they have a 50% chance of reaching. This helps avoid setting goals that people actually believe they have little chance of reaching.
- ***The post-goal-achievement environment.*** When stretch goals are attained, it is a cause for celebration, so make

¹¹ Retrieved from <http://awesomculture.com/2011/10/03/use-the-pygmalion-effect-to-create-a-high-performing-team/>

sure to recognize achievements. However, don't let that translate into sitting back and relaxing. Use that momentum to reinforce employees' beliefs in themselves and go on to set more stretch goals.

Conclusion

"Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're right."

~ Henry Ford ~

Henry Ford's words ring true for both leaders/managers as well as subordinates. The Pygmalion and Galatea effects explored in this white paper hold the potential to create virtuous cycles of self-fulfilling prophecies that can boost productivity at your organization. Fully leveraging these effects for success includes paying attention not only to how expectations are set and communicated, but also in creating the kind of workplace environment conducive to everyone's development.

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