
The Pygmalion effect

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Abstract

Aims to answer the questions: What is the Pygmalion effect? How can it be used to advance careers? How can the negative effect be broken? Uses Rosenthal's four-factor theory to provide some answers to these questions.

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.

Eliza Doolittle
in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*

It is an interesting psychological phenomenon that people tend to fulfil the expectations that other people have of them. This phenomenon is known as the Pygmalion effect or the self-fulfilling prophecy. The idea that one person's expectations can influence the behaviour of another has been in existence for a long time. The original Pygmalion was a prince of Cyprus in Greek mythology who carved an ivory statue of the ideal woman. This statue was so perfect that he fell in love with it, and called his ideal woman Galatea. Aphrodite (the Goddess of Love) came to his rescue, and she brought the statue to life.

This interesting love story from mythology inspired the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw to write the play *Pygmalion* which was the basis for the musical hit *My Fair Lady*. The underlying theme was that one person, by effort and belief, can change another. Professor Henry Higgins, through his expectations and hard work, changed Eliza Doolittle from an ill-mannered loud flower girl into a soft-spoken sophisticated lady.

In 1965 *Look* magazine in the United States contained an article entitled "Sweeney's miracle." The article refers to a story at the Tulane Biomedical Computer Centre in New Orleans, Louisiana which at the time was headed by James W. Sweeney. According to the article Sweeney said "I am going to make a poorly educated Negro into a computer expert." Racial segregation was almost a way of life in the southern United States at the time. The poorly educated black Sweeney chose was a hospital porter named George Johnson. Johnson then worked as a janitor in the computer centre in the mornings and learned about computers in the afternoons. He was treated as a computer person and according to Sweeney he became "just about the best trainee we ever ran through the place". Johnson was eventually

put in charge of the main computer room and actually trained computer operators himself. Sweeney worked hard to help Johnson make it but puts this down to a stubborn streak which he blamed on his Irish ancestry. I prefer to call it a combination of tenacity and confidence in his own ability to make a success of another person.

These examples show us that the Pygmalion effect is much more than positive thinking. It requires action in addition to thinking and beliefs. Pygmalion did not just think about his ideal woman; he helped create her. Professor Higgins also worked to help Eliza Doolittle live up to his expectations.

It took many hours of hard work. James Sweeney also worked to bring about his so-called miracle. A more recent example can be seen in the popular film *Trading Places*. Many readers may have observed similar examples in both work and personal settings.

Mentors and protégés

The concept of mentors and protégés also traces its origin to Greek mythology. Odysseus left for the Trojan War and put the care of his household and his son Telemachus in the hands of his friend Mentor. He believed Mentor could and would live up to his expectations. These expectations were justified as Odysseus discovered on his return. Again the combination of expectations and actions based on these expectations resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While mentoring has existed in business for many years on an informal basis, only recently has it become formally entrenched in corporate strategic succession planning. The practice entails the assignment of a junior member of staff or a recently recruited graduate known as the protégé to a senior seasoned manager or executive known as the mentor. A mentor who knows about a subordinate's skills and talents can help that person reach his or her career goals.

Mentoring is a typical example of the Pygmalion effect in business.

The relationship of a mentor to a protégé is that of a staff capacity as opposed to a line capacity. The mentor provides advice and shares his or her experience with the protégé. The mentor must constantly act as a positive Pygmalion to make the process effective. This entails encompassing Rosenthal's four factors (covered in a later section of this article).

The Pygmalion effect in banking

For the banking industry the most frightening aspect of the Pygmalion effect is a bank failure. A bank may be perfectly solvent but if a rumour of bankruptcy spreads it often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who expect a bank failure act on this expectation. The belief may actually be false but it is the behaviour which is based on expectations that becomes the driving force.

Foreign exchange dealers realize the part expectations play in currency fluctuation. Fluctuation can play havoc with foreign trade and one of the major advantages of the European Monetary System is the high expectation it has provided for currency stability through its regulations of preventive fluctuation.

Bond traders and stockbrokers are also familiar with the power of expectations. If an investor loses confidence in a stock he or she may sell the entire holdings. If they happen to be large this may encourage other investors to sell their stocks and eventually the price drops because the expectations influence the final outcome. People involved in fraudulent dealings realize the power of expectations on the market.

In 1969, J. Sterling Livingston wrote about "Pygmalion in management" in the *Harvard Business Review*[1]. He had an interesting example from the banking industry. Livingston studied the effectiveness of branch managers at an American bank. Some of the managers had their lending authority decreased because of losses and they became less effective. These managers did not want to lose any more lending authority so they started making only "safe" loans. This led to a loss in business to other banks and a resulting decline in both deposits and profits at their branches. The managers tried to reverse this trend and began accepting questionable credit risks. Livingston maintains that the actions of these managers, "were not so much a matter of poor judgement as an expression of their willingness to take desperate risks in the hope of being able to avoid further damage to their egos and their careers".

In this situation the managers responded to the low expectations of their superiors who reduced their lending authority by behaving in a way that led to even larger credit losses. Their superiors' expectations became self-fulfilling prophecies. Fortunately, the self-fulfilling prophecy also has positive outcomes

and Livingston provides another banking example.

Positive Pygmalions

The bank's executives maintained it took a long time for branch managers to obtain the necessary experience, knowledge and judgement to deal effectively with employee relations, customer relations and credit risks. The most effective branch managers were in their 40s and 50s with one exception who was 27 years old, yet was in the top 10 per cent of managers in terms of effectiveness. This person had been a branch manager at 25 and did such a good job of developing his assistant that he in turn was made a branch manager at 25. The assistant had been assigned to work with two different branch managers who were very effective teachers and also positive Pygmalions.

Here Livingston maintains that a young person's first manager will probably be the most influential on his or her career. If the manager sets high but achievable and challenging goals for the young person and provides the necessary support that person will most likely live up to those expectations.

However, "If this manager is unwilling or unable to develop the skills the young employee needs to perform effectively, the latter will set lower personal standards than he or she is capable of achieving, that person's self-image will be impaired, and he or she will develop negative attitudes towards the job, the employer, and – in all probability – his or her career in business."

Rosenthal's "four-factor theory"

Rosenthal[2] offers a "four-factor theory" to explain the Pygmalion effect. These four factors include both non-verbal and verbal forms of communication. People who have been led to expect good things from their employees, clients, children, etc. appear to provide the following:

- (1) *Climate*. They set an accepting, encouraging social-emotional mood, or climate, for these people. This includes warmth, attention, smiling, nodding the head approvingly, maintaining good eye contact – all position non-verbal kinds of communication, i.e. emotional support.
- (2) *Feedback*. They give these people more verbal clues about their performance,

more reaction, more praise, and sometimes even more criticism – all of which help to teach them what is needed for improvement.

- (3) *Input*. They will literally teach more material and more difficult material to those who supposedly have more potential.
- (4) *Output*. They encourage those who are chosen to ask more questions, urge them to respond more, allow more time to do a job correctly, and give them the benefit of the doubt.

Rosenthal also believes that these factors work both ways -- the worker also influences the manager, the child influences the parent, the client influences the company, by his or her own verbal or non-verbal clues. This influence is known as the Galatea Effect, called after Pygmalions's ideal woman.

The important thing to remember here is to avoid having favourite subordinates. All subordinates should be given opportunities to realize their potential.

Communicating the Pygmalion effect

We can communicate our expectations in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Non-verbal messages are usually communicated unintentionally, and this makes it almost impossible for us to hide our expectations. Our tone of voice, eye contact, body posture, facial expressions, are all examples of non-verbal communication. Non-verbal messages can have negative as well as positive influence. By merely changing our tone of voice we can communicate a completely different message even though the words are the same.

With verbal communication we need to be very careful with the words we use. If I give a tough task to someone and say "this is a very difficult assignment" the connotation may be interpreted as "I expect you to have problems with this one." However, if I say "This is a very difficult assignment and it means a lot to the bank. I know it's a tight deadline and you'll be pushed for time but that's why I'm giving it to you because I know you can do it. If you run into any difficulties, have any problems, or need any assistance please let me know." the message I communicate is that I have full confidence in the person's ability to complete the task successfully and also that I am available in the event of a problem.

An interesting fact about communication is that people cannot not communicate. For instance, when they say nothing, it is usually a sign that they are displeased. The silent treatment can communicate negative feelings even more effectively at times than a strongly worded verbal message.

According to Livingston, the theory also suggests how the circle of negative self-fulfilling prophecies can be broken. This entails changing the initial definition of the situation. One must question the original assumption, arrive at a new definition of the situation and act on this belief.

Being a positive Pygmalion

According to Walder[3] the following are the positive Pygmalion factors. These factors encourage people to live up to high expectations. A positive Pygmalion:

- is easy to talk to and has time for you even when under pressure;
- tries to see merit in your ideas even if they conflict with his/hers;

- tries to help people to understand the company's objectives;
- tries to give people all the information they require;
- displays consistent, high expectations of subordinates;
- tries to encourage people to develop in new directions;
- accepts your mistakes, so long as you learn from them;
- tries to correct mistakes and figure out how they can be prevented in the future;
- expects superior performance and gives recognition for it.

Are you or is your boss a positive Pygmalion?

References

- 1 Livingston, J.S., "Pygmalion in management", *Harvard Business Review*, 1969.
- 2 Rosenthal, R., "The Pygmalion effect lives", *Psychology Today*, September 1973.
- 3 Walder, I., *Leader's Guide to Accompany Productivity and the Self-fulfilling Prophecy*, McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead, 1978.