

The Two Most Important Management Secrets: The Pygmalion and Galatea Effects

The Pygmalion Effect: The Power of the Supervisor's Expectations

By Susan M. Heathfield, About.com Guide

Your expectations of people and their expectations of themselves are the key factors in how well people perform at work. Known as the Pygmalion effect and the Galatea effect, respectively, the power of expectations cannot be overestimated. These are the fundamental principles you can apply to performance expectations and potential performance improvement at work.

You can summarize the Pygmalion effect, often known as the power of expectations, by considering:

- Every supervisor has expectations of the people who report to him.
- Supervisors communicate these expectations consciously or unconsciously.
- People pick up on, or consciously or unconsciously read, these expectations from their supervisor.
- People perform in ways that are consistent with the expectations they have picked up on from the supervisor.

The Pygmalion effect was described by J. Sterling Livingston in the September/October, 1988 *Harvard Business Review*. "The way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them," Livingston said in his article, *Pygmalion in Management*.

The Pygmalion effect enables staff to excel in response to the manager's message that they are capable of success and expected to succeed. The Pygmalion effect can also undermine staff performance when the subtle communication from the manager tells them the opposite. These cues are often subtle. As an example, the supervisor fails to praise a staff person's performance as frequently as he praises others. The supervisor talks less to a particular employee.

Livingston went on to say about the supervisor, "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 skillful 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."

Can you imagine how performance will improve if your supervisors communicate positive thoughts about people to people? If the supervisor actually believes that every employee has the ability to make a positive contribution at work, the telegraphing of that message, either consciously or unconsciously, will positively affect employee performance.

And, the effect of the supervisor gets even better than this. When the supervisor holds positive expectations about people, she helps individuals improve their self-concept and thus, self-esteem. People believe they can succeed and contribute and their performance rises to the level of their own expectations.

Take a look at the Galatea effect to learn more.

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The Galatea Effect: The Power of Self-expectations

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Even more powerful than the Pygmalion effect, the Galatea effect is a compelling factor in employee performance. The manager who can assist employees to believe in themselves and in their efficacy, has harnessed a powerful performance improvement tool.

I'm sure you've heard of the words, "self-fulfilling prophecy." Applied as the Galatea effect, these words mean that the individual's opinion about his ability and his self-expectations about his performance largely determine his performance. If an employee thinks she can succeed, she will likely succeed. Consequently, any actions the supervisor can take that increase the employee's feelings of positive self-worth, will help the employee's performance improve.

I don't mean to over-simplify this concept. Many other factors also contribute to the level of an employee's performance including your company culture, the employee's life experiences, education, family support and relationships with coworkers. However, positive supervision is one of the key factors that keeps good employees on the job.

These are ways in which you can encourage positive, powerful self-expectations in employees.

- Provide opportunities for the employee to experience increasingly challenging assignments. Make sure she succeeds at each level before moving forward.
- Enable the employee to participate in potentially successful projects that bring continuous improvement to the workplace.
- Provide one-to-one coaching with the employee. This coaching should emphasize 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.

Harness the power of the employee's self-expectations to ensure powerful, productive, improving, successful work performance. Want more information about the history, the research about and the background related to the Pygmalion effect and the Galatea effect? Read [The Self-fulfilling Prophecy or Pygmalion Effect](#) from [Accel-Team.com](#).