The Pygamalion effect…or the self-fulfilling prophecy

The Pygmalion effect - the name being inspired by the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with one of his statues and had such high expectations of her that she came to life - is the phenomenon in which the higher the expectations placed on people, the better the execution of their work.

The Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. It argues a leader can motivate their employees to perform better by setting higher expectations for them.

It was originally studied by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1963) in context with a teacher's expectations of students. It was observed that the students who were expected to do well (the teacher was given ‘false’ IQ test results for them) did indeed over perform, while the ones who were not expected to perform well, did not.

The effect, as applied to the corporate world, was first described by J. Sterling Livingston in a 1988 Harvard Business Review article - "The way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them".

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Setting expectations for employee performance and behaviour is one of the key responsibilities of management. The expectations a manager holds of their employees can strongly influence the employees' behaviour. Managers must understand this influence and how to harness it to work towards organisational goals.

If a manager is convinced that the people in their group are high performers, they'll reliably outperform a group whose manager believes the opposite - even if the innate talent of the two groups is similar. Livingston concurred that creating positive expectations is difficult - he suggested that managers focus special attention on an employee's first year, matching new hires where possible with outstanding supervisors, because that's when expectations are set. If managers' expectations are high, productivity is likely to be excellent. If their expectations are low, productivity is likely to be poor.

Managers' high expectations must also pass the test of reality before they can be translated into performance. Subordinates will not be motivated to reach high levels of productivity unless they consider the boss's high expectations realistic and achievable. If goals are unattainable, people become discouraged and settle for results that are lower than they can achieve."

Something takes place in the minds of superior managers that does not occur in the minds of those who are less effective. While superior managers are consistently able to create high performance expectations that their subordinates fulfil, weaker managers are not successful in obtaining a similar response. The reason, in part, seems to be that superior managers have greater confidence than other managers in their own ability to develop the talents of their subordinates. What managers believe about themselves - their ability to select, train, and motivate - subtly influences what they believe about their subordinates, what they expect of them, and how they treat them.

So, next time you have to meet an end of month target, as a leader, first believe in yourself and your guidance and secondly, project that belief outwards onto your team and the figures will automatically add up.

Yours in performance,
Pamela O' Hanlon
Project Coordinator