

Pygmalion in Management

by J. Sterling Livingston, *Harvard Business Review*, January 2003

The title of the article is based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* which brings out that the way one person views and treats another can, for better or worse, be transforming. (In ancient Greek mythology, Pygmalion fell in love with one of his sculptures, which then came to life.) If a manager is convinced that the people in her group are first-rate, they will outperform a comparable group whose manager does not have such confidence in the team. If managers' expectations from their team members are high, productivity is likely to be excellent. If their expectations are low, team productivity is likely to be poor.

Managers cannot avoid the problem of low expectations merely by hiding their feelings from subordinates. If managers believe subordinates will perform poorly, the message is often communicated unintentionally. Indeed, managers often communicate the most when they believe they are communicating the least. The silent treatment communicates negative feelings even more effectively, at times, than a direct negative feedback. What is important is not what the manager says but how she behaves. Indifferent and noncommittal treatment, more often than not communicates low expectations and leads to poor performance.

Merely having high expectations is not enough. Subordinates will not be motivated to stretch themselves unless they consider the high expectations realistic and achievable. If they are asked to strive for unattainable goals, they will eventually give up trying and settle for below par results.

Good managers have greater confidence than other managers in their own ability to develop the talents of their subordinates. The high expectations of the good managers are based primarily on confidence in their own ability to select, train, and motivate their subordinates. What managers believe about themselves subtly influences what they believe about their subordinates, what they expect of them, and how they treat them. Stated in another way, the superior managers' record of success and self-confidence give their high expectations credibility. So subordinates accept these expectations as realistic and try hard to achieve them.

Successful managers build their teams in a different way. They do not pick their subordinates at random. They are careful to select only those who they "know"

will succeed. They give up on a subordinate slowly because that means giving up on their judgment and ability in selecting, training, and motivating people. Less effective managers select subordinates more quickly and give up on them more easily, believing that the fault lies with the subordinate, not themselves.

The Pygmalion effect is particularly relevant for young people. As people gain experience, their self-image gradually hardens, and they begin to equate themselves with their track record. It is difficult for them and for their managers to generate mutually high expectations unless they have outstanding records.

A young person's first manager is likely to be the most influential in that person's career. If managers are unable or unwilling to develop the skills young employees need to perform effectively, the latter will set lower personal standards than they are capable of achieving. Their self-images will be impaired, and they will develop a negative attitude towards the job, the employer, and their career. Employees with high aspirations will leave, hoping to find better opportunities. If, on the other hand, managers help young employees achieve their full potential, they will build the foundations for successful careers.

In most companies, new graduates do not work closely with experienced middle managers or senior executives. Normally they report to first-line managers who are not very experienced or not very effective. While there are exceptions, first-line managers generally are either old timers who are experienced but found lacking in competence for higher levels of responsibility, or they are younger people who are making the transition from "doing" to "managing."

In both cases, managers will not be able to develop the productive capabilities of their subordinates. As a consequence, many college graduates get off to a false start. Once they realize that their abilities are not being put to good use, they develop a negative outlook toward their jobs, employers, and business careers.

To conclude, if managers have low expectations, they will erode the self-esteem of young people and distort their self-image. But if they have high expectations, subordinates will grow in self-confidence and do well. The manager is Pygmalion.