



# **SYMBIONT PERFORMANCE GROUP, INC.**

## **The Principle of the Self-fulfilling Prophecy**

The principle of the Self-fulfilling prophecy refers to the idea that an individual or group's positive or negative expectation about a circumstance, event or other person can actually cause the expected outcome to occur. The original concept was developed by Robert K. Merton to explain how a belief or expectation, whether correct or not, can affect the outcome of a situation or the way people will behave. The essence of the self-fulfilling prophesy is that a prediction comes true simply because people believe in it and, in fact, *make it happen*.

A hypothetical example of this notion is the impact of that the thinking of a group of depositors can have on the fortunes of a savings bank. Let's say that a particular depositor states an opinion (not true) that the Midtown Savings Bank is in financial trouble based on hearing some incorrect information. He shares his opinion with some friends who are also depositors at the bank, and alarmed, they all run down to the Bank to withdraw their money. Others in and around the Midtown Savings Bank notice this increased activity and begin asking questions. Upon hearing the bad news, they too decide to withdraw their funds, and very soon the process snowballs to the point where the bank doesn't have enough reserves on hand to satisfy the withdrawal requests of all the depositors. As a result, the Midtown Savings Bank which was totally solvent when it opened that morning becomes insolvent by the end of the day. The self-fulfilling prophesy has struck!

## **People Live Up to Our Expectations**

In 1968 Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen, professors of social psychology at Harvard University, described an experiment in which they told teachers that randomly selected groups of students in their classes were "intellectual bloomers," who should be expected to outperform the other students in their classes. In spite of the fact that there were initially no differences between these students and their peers, when tested one year later, the "intellectual bloomers," experienced greater gains in IQ and reading grades, and were described by teachers as more likely to succeed in the future, as more interesting, as showing greater intellectual curiosity, and as happier.

Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded that a self-fulfilling prophecy was at work. They believed that the teachers in their experiment had subtly and unconsciously encouraged and contributed to the performance they expected to see. Not only did they spend more time with these students, they were also more enthusiastic about teaching them and unintentionally showed more warmth and appreciation to them than to the other students. Through the use of certain facial expressions, postures and perhaps, touch, these teacher may have communicated to the children of the experimental group that they *expected* improved intellectual performance.



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These results seemed to clearly demonstrate that teachers' expectations can affect student achievement.

### **Implications for Managers: *The Pygmalion Effect***

In the September/October, 1988 *Harvard Business Review*, author J. Sterling Livingston described the Pygmalion effect in his landmark article *Pygmalion in Management*. Livingston's article placed strong emphasis on the impact of the self-fulfilling prophecy in supervising people. "The way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them," Livingston said. He described the rationale for this effect as follows:

- Every supervisor has expectations (positive or negative) of his or her subordinates based on pre-conceived notions about them. Forming such expectations is natural and unavoidable.
- Supervisors convey their expectations of subordinates through their interactions with them directly but also often in subtle, subconscious ways.
- Subordinates consciously and subconsciously sense and internalize supervisor's expectation of them. Once formed such expectations tend to be self-sustaining.
- People tend to behave and perform in ways that are consistent with the signals they have picked up from their supervisors. They tend to respond to such cues by adjusting their behavior to match them.

When you intentionally or unintentionally show a lack of interest, regard, or appreciation toward another person, you convey a low level of value for that person. The other person senses your negative vibrations, and this tends to diminish his or her feeling of self-worth, thereby causing the person to respond accordingly. The bottom line is that our expectations become our reality.

### **How Managers Communicate Expectations**

If you think a person is a valuable asset to your team, you will automatically treat that person in a manner that reflects your impressions. If you treat your team member as a valuable player, the team member will act, and even become valuable. Similarly, if you are continually putting someone down, he or she will eventually give up, accept the situation as it is and come to the conclusion that there is little hope of moving forward. The key to using the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy for productive purposes then, is to strive to *develop and maintain positive expectations of others*.

Here are some examples of ways to accomplish this:

- Don't prejudge anyone or demand less of anyone than is required. Don't let past performance *automatically* predict future results. Remember that people will live up to your expectations of them.



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- Always look for the best in others. Clearly everybody has strengths and weaknesses, but it makes no sense to focus on others' weaknesses if we want people to perform well. Focusing on weakness makes people feel down on themselves and only serves to create roadblocks to productivity. Finding and emphasizing people's strengths makes them feel valued and important, and motivates them to do their best.
- Pay equal attention to people in group situations. Facilitate equivalent levels of participation and involvement. Leaving individuals out of a discussion or giving little weight to their ideas can cause them to develop a feeling of low self-worth, which can decrease their desire to contribute.
- Provide uniform amounts and appropriate levels of accurate feedback to each subordinate. Giving less feedback to top performers than lower level performers can convey that you don't really appreciate the great job the top performer is doing. Similarly, providing less feedback to a weaker performer can suggest that you don't really care about helping him or her to get better.
- Pay special attention to the non-verbal (usually subliminal) signals you project to subordinates. Strive not to telegraph your expectations unintentionally through your gestures, posture, facial expressions or eye-contact. You will probably never be able to eliminate all negative expectations from your thinking, but you should always try your best to conceal your negative expectations of others from them.