The Pygmalion Effect in Leadership

The Pygmalion effect describes a simple but powerful truth: the expectations a leader holds about people tend to shape how those people perform. When leaders genuinely believe that someone can succeed, they behave in ways that help that person succeed; when they expect little, they often, without meaning to, create the very weakness they predicted. The effect is a form of **self-fulfilling prophecy**, and it is one of the most studied ideas in education and management.

Where the Idea Comes From

The name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had carved; his devotion was so strong that the statue came to life. In 1968, psychologists **Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson** tested the idea in a school. They told teachers that certain pupils were "about to bloom" intellectually, although these pupils had been chosen at random. By the end of the year, the selected pupils showed larger gains than their classmates. The only difference was what their teachers expected. Later studies found the same pattern in factories, sales teams, banks and military training.

Why It Matters for Leaders

Leaders constantly form impressions of people: who is talented, who is slow, who will go far. These impressions quietly influence where leaders spend their time, whom they trust with important work and how they speak to each person. Because people are sensitive to these signals, a leader's expectations become part of the working environment. Understanding the effect helps leaders use their belief in people deliberately, and avoid limiting people through unfair early judgments.

1. The Expectation Cycle

The effect works as a cycle with four steps:

- **Expectation:** the leader forms a belief about a person's potential.
- **Behavior:** the belief changes how the leader treats that person.
- **Response:** the person senses the treatment and reacts, often by trying harder, or by giving up.
- **Results:** performance confirms the original belief, which becomes even stronger.

Example: a manager believes a new analyst is sharp, invites her to key meetings and asks for her ideas. She prepares carefully, contributes well and soon becomes one of the strongest members of the team.

2. Four Factors in a Leader's Behavior

Research explains how expectations turn into action through four factors:

- **Climate:** the warmth, attention and encouragement a leader shows, through tone of voice, eye contact and patience.
- **Input:** the amount of time, information, training and challenging work a leader gives.
- **Output:** the opportunities people get to speak, ask questions, try ideas and contribute.
- **Feedback:** how much useful praise and specific guidance people receive.

Example: two team members submit similar reports. One receives detailed comments and a new challenge; the other receives a short "fine". Over months, the gap between them grows.

3. The Galatea Effect

The Galatea effect is the inner version of Pygmalion: when people believe in their own ability, they perform better. Leaders strengthen this self-belief by giving meaningful responsibility, recognizing progress, and reminding people of past successes. Self-belief then keeps working even when the leader is not in the room.

Example: a supervisor asks a hesitant employee to lead a small project and publicly thanks him for each milestone. His confidence grows, and he volunteers for a larger project the next year.

4. The Golem Effect

The Golem effect is the negative side. When a leader decides that someone is weak, that person receives fewer chances, less support and colder feedback. Mistakes are noticed more than successes. The person loses confidence, performance falls, and the low expectation comes true. The Golem effect is often invisible to the leader, who simply feels that the judgment was correct.

Example: after one poor presentation, a new employee is never asked to present again. A year later, the manager describes her as "not good with clients", although she was never given another chance.

Applying the Pygmalion Effect at Work

- **Set high but realistic expectations** for every person, not only for favorites or star performers.

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- **Say your expectations out loud:** tell people what you believe they can achieve, and why.
- **Match belief with support:** provide training, resources, coaching and time.
- **Give specific feedback** that shows you are paying attention and expect progress.
- **Check your biases:** notice first impressions based on background, age, accent or one early mistake, and test them against facts.
- **Share the idea with other leaders**, so the whole organization builds a culture of confidence.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Believing in people but giving no real support or resources.
- Setting impossible targets and calling them "high expectations".
- Giving empty praise that people do not believe.
- Labelling someone early and never revisiting the judgment.
- Showing high expectations only to people who are similar to you.

Measuring the Effect

- **Development:** how many team members receive stretch assignments and training.
- **Engagement:** survey results on feeling trusted and supported by the manager.
- **Performance:** progress over time, especially for people who started below average.
- **Fairness:** whether opportunities and praise are spread across the whole team.
- **Retention:** whether talented people stay and grow inside the team.

Example: A New Sales Team

A regional manager takes over a team with a poor reputation. Instead of accepting the label, she meets each person, reviews their strengths and says clearly, "I believe this team can reach the top three regions." She agrees on realistic monthly goals, pairs weaker members with experienced colleagues, and gives quick, specific feedback after every client visit. She also celebrates small wins in weekly meetings. Within a year, the team rises from last place to fourth, and two members are promoted. Nothing changed in the market; what changed was the leader's belief, and the behavior that came with it.

Quick Checklist

- Do I expect every team member to grow, not just a few?
- Have I told each person what I believe they can achieve?
- Am I giving everyone fair time, information and challenging work?
- Is my feedback specific, frequent and encouraging?
- Which of my judgments about people should I test again?

Key Takeaways

- The Pygmalion effect shows that leaders' expectations shape people's performance.
- Expectations work through a cycle: belief, behavior, response and results.
- Climate, input, output and feedback are the four channels that carry expectations.
- The Golem effect is its harmful opposite, while the Galatea effect builds self-belief.
- High expectations work only when they are genuine, realistic and backed by real support.

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