# Pygmalion Effect

## Idea In Short

The Pygmalion Effect gets its name from ancient Greek mythology and the story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with one of his sculptures. Pygmalion is also the name of a play by George Bernard Shaw. The play explores the idea that how you treat another person impacts their life, either for better or for worse.

The term Pygmalion Effect originated from a poem by the Greek poet Ovid entitled Metamorphoses. Pygmalion was a gifted sculptor who created a statue of a woman so perfect that he fell in love with his creation. As the story goes, after Pygmalion desperately prayed to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, she took pity on him by bringing the statue to life. Rosenthal and Jacobson became inspired by the story. Subsequently, they named their findings after the sculptor.

## Original experiment

The Pygmalion Effect was first observed in a classroom. Social psychologist Robert Rosenthal and elementary school principal Lenore Jacobson observed this phenomenon in 1968 at a school. They conducted an experiment to test whether students' achievements could be self-fulfilling, based on teachers' expectations. Rosenthal and Jacobsen gave elementary school children an IQ test and then informed their teachers which children were going to be average and which children were going to be Bloomers, the 20% of students who showed unusual potential for intellectual growth. They found that the teachers did not expect too much from the average children and gave all the attention to the Bloomers. The teachers created a nicer environment for the Bloomers, they gave them more time and attention, they called on them for answers more often and they gave them more detailed feedback when they got something wrong.

## Experiment results

However, unknown to the teachers, these students were selected randomly and may or may not have fulfilled that criteria. After eight months, they came back and retested the children's intelligence.

> The results showed that Bloomers IQ scores had risen (experimental group) significantly higher than the average students (control group), even though these academic bloomers were chosen at random. The bloomers gained an average of two IQ points in verbal ability, seven points in reasoning and four points in over all IQ.

The experiment finally showed that teachers' expectations worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The teachers' expectations had altered the way they treated the children and influenced the children's abilities. In summary, Rosenthal shared four key factors that help explain how the Pygmalion Effect works:

1. **Climate** – Warm and friendly behaviour
2. **Input** – The tendency for teachers to devote energy to their special students
3. **Output** – The way teachers call on those students more often for answers
4. **Feedback** – Giving more helpful responses to students considered special

## Pygmalion Effect in the Workplace

It turns out that the Pygmalion Effect doesn't just exist in schools; it exists in the workplace as well. If a manager believes that their team consists only of high-performers, they'll outperform an equivalent team whose manager believes the opposite. When team members are treated as though they were high performers, they try to live up to that image. They behave and perform how they believe a high performer would.

### Business management

In the context of business management, the Pygmalion effect applies to the performance of employees, relative to managers and leaders' expectations. For example, when a manager communicates high expectations, the worker's actual performance tends to increase to match the expectations. The Pygmalion effect represents a means for leaders to influence employee's performance, consequently, the organization's performance.

### Strategic management

In strategic management, this phenomenon connects leaders and managers' expectations to achievement of strategies through the workforce. Therefore, strategists should apply Pygmalion effect to positively influence workers and achieve strategic business objectives.

### HR management

The Pygmalion effect describes the performance of groups or teams, and even entire business organizations. The expectation-performance relationship unquestionably applies through the psychological influence of leaders and managers on individuals, teams, groups, divisions, departments, and organizations. In this regard, organizational leaders must keep the Pygmalion effect in mind, especially in developing job requirements, expectations, and goals. The objective should be to optimize the organization's performance by employing the positive effects of this phenomenon on the workforce.

## Summary

As a manager, the Pygmalion Effect can give you a secret superpower to create a high-performing team. This is because that when you believe a team member has what it takes to become a great performer, your belief becomes a reality. There are two facets of the Pygmalion effect. First, you should understand that raising your expectations promotes subordinate performance. Next, managers tend to allocate their time and energy to subordinates in proportion to their expectations. To use the Pygmalion Effect, treat all of our subordinates fairly to exact superior performance.