

People Live Up or Down to a Leader's Expectations **Jim Clemmer**

"Our conduct is influenced not by our experience but by our expectations." — George Bernard Shaw, 19th century Irish playwright, critic, social reformer

"Tell me about the people at the organization you just left," said the senior manager who was screening candidates to fill a key leadership role. "They were uneducated and lazy," the candidate responded. "You always had to keep an eye on them because they were constantly trying to goof off or rip off the company. They were lousy communicators, resisted change, and only cared about themselves." "That's too bad," replied the senior manager, "I am sorry to say that's the same type of people you'll find here. This doesn't sound like a job you would enjoy."

Once the next candidate was seated, she was asked the same question. "Oh, they were great," she said. "Although many of them couldn't read and we had some trouble communicating with each other, they were very driven to succeed. Once we all got to know each other, they were constantly helping one other and working together." "Great," the senior manager responded, "That's the same type of people you'll find here."

Everyone who becomes, or aspires to be, a leader of others (whether that's as a manager, project leader, teacher, coach, or parent) should be required to read the 1969 *Harvard Business Review* classic, "Pygmalion in Management" by J. Sterling Livingston. Pygmalion was sculptor in Greek mythology who carved a statue of a beautiful woman that was later brought to life. George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (which was the basis for "My Fair Lady") used a similar theme.

In the play, Eliza Dolittle explains, "The difference between a flower girl and a lady is not how she behaves, but how she is treated." Livingston goes on to present a number of his own studies and cites other research proving "if a manager's expectations are high, productivity is likely to be excellent. If his expectations are low, productivity is likely to be poor."

Years ago, Zenger-Miller co-founder, Jack Zenger used a metaphor to describe "The Pygmalion Effect" that's always been very powerful for me. He explained that goldfish will grow larger, or stay smaller according to the size of the fish tank or pond they're in (someone later told me whitefish do the same). I've since come to think of the influence and expectations of leaders as the Fish Tank Factor.

If leaders expect mature and responsible, adult behavior, that's what they generally get. If managers expect "their people" to behave like immature, irresponsible kids, that's what they generally get. Whether we think they're eagles or turkeys, they'll prove us right. Many people don't believe in or understand the power of self-determination. So especially in their formative years, they grow large or remain small according to the environment their managers, coaches, teachers, or parents have put them in. But it's never too late to help them grow by expanding their environment and teaching them self-leadership.

The research on the Fish Tank Factor is powerful and compelling. Doctors can affect the success of medical treatment by their expectations of their patients (positive or negative conversations

overhead, suggestions made, or attitudes conveyed while patients are asleep, in a coma, or under anesthesia have proven to influence treatment outcomes). Teachers' expectations of the students have a dramatic impact not only on their marks, but on their IQ scores as well (The title of Livingston's article was inspired by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jackson's book, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, describing "the effect of expectations on the intellectual development of children").

Parent's expectations and reinforcement of their kids (especially before age eight) strongly influence their character and behavior. A study by David Upton of Harvard Business School on the billions of dollars invested to increase manufacturing flexibility concluded, "Plants that managers think are flexible tend to get a lot of practice and get better at it. It's a self-fulfilling belief. We've found that flexibility is determined much more by the people in the plants, their industry experience and the practice they get than by the use of a certain type of technology."

It's a values issue that's very closely related to visioning or imaging — the behavior we get in those who look to us for leadership is often shaped by the picture we have of them. They become what we expect.