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The Power of Expectation
May 21, 2015

Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal teamed up with a principal of an elementary school in San Francisco. They told teachers in eighteen different classrooms that results of an assessment test had given a strong indication of those students who would make the greatest progress in the coming year. They told the teachers the names of those students and then took comparative assessments at the end of the year to see how each of the students fared. Indeed the 20% of students who had been identified by Rosenthal as “bloomers” had done significantly better than the others in areas such as verbal and reasoning skills, and IQ increases. The pre-year assessment test had worked in identifying high-potential students: the bloomers got smarter—and at a faster rate—than their classmates. But did the assessment really work?

For the sake of this experiment, Rosenthal had lied. The students labeled as bloomers didn’t actually score higher on the original assessment. He simply picked them at random and let the teachers know they were ripe for success. Why did Rosenthal do this? He did it to find out what happened to students when teachers believed that students had high potential. He randomly selected 20% of the students to be the bloomers and the other 80% to be the control group. But at the end of the year the bloomers became smarter than their peers. Some bloomers achieved more than 50 percent intelligence gains in a single year. They even kept up gains in the following years when teachers were told nothing of their abilities. In other words, just having one year of a teacher believing in their abilities was enough to substantially impact the trajectory of a student.

How did this work? When teachers believed their students were bloomers, they set high expectations for their success. This in turn had the teachers engage in more supportive behavior towards the students that ultimately boosted the students’ confidence and enhanced their learning success. The “teachers communicated more warmly to the bloomers, gave them more challenging assignments, called on them more often, and provided them with more feedback.”¹

One of the reasons I find this study fascinating is that the school district in which I attended school from kindergarten through high school selected 30 students at the beginning of the third grade who were considered the best and the brightest for the whole district. These students were put in a classroom together through sixth grade. I happened to be one of them. Many of those thirty students were my friends until graduation from high school and went to attend some of the best colleges in America. But I have to wonder now. Were we really any smarter at all? Or did the expectations of those who taught us make the difference?

In the early 1980s Dov Eden, an Israeli psychologist, published some rather extraordinary results. He had been able to predict with great accuracy soldiers who would become top performers in the Israeli Defense Forces. He looked at comprehensive assessments of some 1,000 soldiers prior to an eleven-week training period and told platoon leaders which soldiers were most likely to succeed. Over the next eleven weeks, the trainees took various tests on combat tactics, mapping, weaponry skills, and standard operating procedures. And the results were just as Eden had predicted: the high performers he had identified were indeed high performers.

The question that everyone asked was how did Eden identify the high performers. Certainly this would be important for those doing military training. The answer was not complicated. The ones who had succeeded were those whom Eden had pointed out to the platoon leaders. There was nothing else special about them. They had been randomly selected from among all the soldiers attending the training. Yet these very average soldiers ended up doing significantly better on the battery of assessments. Eden's prophecy had affected the way the platoon leaders acted toward certain soldiers and the results were significant. In the course of the training, "the platoon leaders who held high expectations of their trainees provided more help, career advice, and feedback to their trainees. When their trainees made mistakes, instead of assuming that they lacked ability, the platoon leaders saw opportunities for teaching and learning. The supportive behaviors of the platoon leaders boosted the confidence and ability of the trainees, enabling and encouraging them to achieve higher performance."²

The stories of Rosenthal and Eden are not selective. Evidence shows that leaders' beliefs can bring about self-fulfilling prophecies in many settings. Management researcher Brian McNatt conducted an analysis of seventeen different studies with over 2,800 employees in a wide range of work organizations, from banking to retail sales to manufacturing. Overall, McNatt's meta-analysis showed that when leaders were randomly assigned to view their employees as bloomers, the employees bloomed.³ One particular study that bore this conclusion out included 191 employees of an R&D unit for a chemical company in the Midwest.⁴ I mention this study because I believe it mirrors the environment that is often seen in the Energy Corridor. And what did this study find? Results similar to what has already been mentioned. When supervisors had a higher view of an employee's creative ability, they supported them in more productive ways, and the employees performed more creatively in their research tasks.

Most of us have heard about the importance of getting the right people on the bus if we are going to succeed. And there is certainly a good deal of truth to that. People are gifted in different ways. Teams need people with grit and determination as well as well as certain aptitudes, experience, social skills, and emotional intelligence. But the stories and studies I have shared with you today, tell us something as equally important as getting the right people on the bus. They tell us the right people on the bus need not be outstanding, but those who lead them must believe they can be, and support them in becoming just that.

A couple weeks back I spoke to you about Francis Su, mathematics professor at Harvey Mudd University in southern California. He attended Harvard for graduate school, but in his first year the second of his parents died and he was very much struggling in the program. His PhD advisor told him he would never make it. It was at that point that another professor in the department recognized Su's plight, listened to him, told him he would not like to see him quit and that he would gladly be his advisor. This was just the encouragement Su needed. Today, Su is a distinguished professor, having received a coveted national teaching award, and now acts as president of the prestigious Mathematical Association of America. Su is a success in just about anyone's book, and he is a success because someone believed in him.

Two thousand years ago a movement was started that now has millions, even billions of followers. It is called Christianity. It was started by Jesus who took twelve men, most of whom were fisherman under the age of twenty. They were an insignificant lot, but Jesus told them he would make them fishers of men. And that is just what they became. This means, of course, that when we choose to bestow the gift of healthy expectations on a child, or a spouse, or a friend, or a colleague, we not only enable them to become more than perhaps they ever dreamed, but we ourselves have the opportunity of walking in the way of Jesus.

¹ Adam Grant, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success* (Penguin, 2013), 98-100.

² Ibid, 97-100.

³ D. Brian McNatt, "Ancient Pygmalion Joins Contemporary Management: A Meta-Analysis of the Result," *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2000), 85:320-321.

⁴ Pamela Tierney & Steven M. Farmer, "The Pygmalion Process and Employee Creativity," *Journal of Management* (2004), 30:413-432.