

What 5 classic psychological experiments can teach workplace leaders

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A seismic shift has taken place in the last 100 years in the way we lead and manage people in the workplace.

Early 20th-century management focused on workforce efficiency. This was the age of Henry Ford where compartmentalized employees, such as the factory worker toiling on an assembly line depicted by Charlie Chaplin in the 1936 comedy .

Skip ahead a few generations, and the modern workplace is very different from the era of scientific management. This is the age of behavioral management where productivity derives from understanding employee motivation. In this knowledge age, managers and leaders need to know a little bit about what makes individual employees tick, and they can benefit from studying the following five classic psychological experiments in human behavior.

1. Stanford Prison Experiment.

In this highly controversial 1971 Stanford University study led by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, a research team in the university basement where paid volunteers, screened for being "psychologically stable," were randomly grouped into prisoners and guards. In a remarkably short period of time, the prisoners and guards slipped into stereotypical roles with the prisoners becoming submissive to the increasingly bullying and sadistic guards. The experiment quickly got out of hand and was stopped after just six days.

What this experiment illuminates is the situational component of human behavior and how people quickly conform to negative roles irrespective of

their personal code of ethics. The average large workplace tends to have clearly defined roles and hierarchies. Leaders who allow authority to go to their heads can rapidly create a negative culture of control and submission.

This controversial experiment reminds leaders and leaders-of-leaders, that leaders set the culture and tone of the organization and that they need to create a constructive and harmonious environment where coworkers feel engaged and productive.

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2. The Pygmalion Effect.

This 1968 experiment was conducted by two psychologists, Rosenthal and Jacobson, in Oak Elementary School in South San Francisco. Faculty members were informed that the students were being given a "Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition" measuring "potential academic spurters."

The names of the top 20 percent high potentials were revealed to the teachers. Unbeknown to the teachers, these tests could not predict potential and the 20 percent were randomly selected from the group. This resulted in a where the teachers subliminally focused their energies on the high-performing children and set easier tasks for the perceived low achievers. These 20 percent randomly selected children were retested eight months later and they scored significantly higher in the acquisition test.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story is told of the sculptor, Pygmalion, who falls in love with his own carved statue. The teachers, it seems, became

captivated by the academically gifted pupils that they were nurturing, demonstrating how expectation influences performance.

The average workplace varies in ability and potential with the high performers (or HiPos) commanding most of the attention and resources. Leaders must check their assumptions concerning high performers, look outside the narrow leadership pipelines and realize that everybody in the organization could perform to their potential, given the right levels of encouragement, support and "love".

Dov Frohman argues in "," that " leaders are found in the strangest places. Often the best candidates turn out to be people from outside the mainstream -- the misfits, the critics, sometimes even the naysayers -- who at first glance one would never expect would have leadership potential. So be prepared to look for new leaders in unexpected places and to give them the opportunity they need."

3. The Piano Staircase.

In 2009, Volkswagen carried out a simple experiment at the Odenplan subway in Stockholm. Overnight, they transformed the staircase adjacent to the elevator into a giant keyboard of the type used in the movie *Big* with Tom Hanks. During the course of the experiment, 66 percent of commuters rather than the escalator, showing that most people naturally choose fun environments.

Some leaders are hesitant about creating a fun workplace but by Erin Fluegge Woolf at University of Florida suggests that a fun environment drives

up employee productivity and reduce absenteeism. Maybe piano stairs are a bit excessive, but to be effective leaders must constantly be exploring creative ways to increase employee engagement.

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4. The Milgram Experiment.

Perhaps one of the most unethical psychological experiments of all time was the 1961 Milgram experiment at Yale University. Volunteers were told to administer an electric shock if they gave an incorrect answer. Two-thirds of volunteers applied electric shocks to potentially fatal levels when instructed to do so by the authority figure. In fact, the recipient was an actor and no electric shocks took place, but the volunteers weren't aware of this and seemed to abandon their personal ethics in deference to authority.

People do not electrocute their coworkers, but the behavioral principle of abandoning personal moral judgment in the workplace under the influence of a dominant authority figure is common in large organizations. Some of the infamous corporate misconducts such as Enron and, more recently, Volkswagen, involved coworkers carrying out unethical practices against their conscience when instructed to do so. Leaders must become aware of how power and authority plays out in the workplace.

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5. The Invisible Gorilla.

Harvard graduates Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons invited participants to focus on a simple task, counting students passing a ball in a circle. The study found that during their busy counting, most participants failed to notice a person walk into the circle, illustrating how humans miss important details when they overestimate their ability to multitask.

David Sanbonmatsu, professor of psychology at the University of Utah said, "When people multitask, often they do multiple things badly." This has very important ramifications for the culture of multitasking in the workplace. Managers and leaders should not overwhelm their staff with multiple tasks and should coach individuals to focus on completing single assignments in order to limit distraction and maximize productivity.

In this age of behavioral management, it behooves managers and leaders to learn some basics in human behavior. Psychological experiments are great resources for understanding certain patterns of human behavior in the workplace, such as setting the right leadership tone, supporting coworkers, creating fun environments, reinforcing ethical behavior and helping coworkers become more productive. The clear message is: some basic psychology can improve your leadership skills.