

Example of pygmalion in management article review

[Business](#), [Management](#)



The article opens with a quotation from George Bernard Shaw's land mark work *Pygmalion* in which the premise of the article is surmised. In this case the quotation implies that people behave not in a way which is a product of personal traits and qualities but in a way which reflects the expectations and treatment of the individual by those around them. As such, the author of the article raises key questions in the field of management from the outset despite thus far only getting one paragraph into the article.

Having quoted from Shaw's *Pygmalion* Livingston (1988) then goes on to set out the basic problem and what may be seen as the thesis statement of the paper. In this case, Livingston indicates that while many managers seem to treat their subordinates in a way which encourages high levels of performance, there is a far greater number of treat their sub-ordinates in a way which encourages low levels of performance. Having identified this problem Livingston then expressly states the belief that there is a direct link between management expectations and treatment of sub-ordinates and the overall level of performance of those employees. In justifying the statement, Livingston (1988) goes on to consider that such a relationship has been widely accepted in other professions including those in behavioural sciences and teaching but has yet to be widely adopted in the context of the managerial environment.

Having identified his own position on the subject, Livingston (1988) then goes on to consider the empirical evidence on the subject of how the role of expectations plays a part in the generation of performance within the individual and organisation. This is case, the author refers back to some key

and historical case studies with Oberlander's 1961 studies at the Metropolitan Life Insurance company being considered to be one of the earliest studies confirming the fact that when managerial expectations are high, the likely result is an increase in performance as sub-ordinates attempt to live up to these expectations. In presenting a credible argument, Livingston (1988) goes on to cite further evidence from a range of contexts and industrial sectors including companies such as AT&T as well as examples from the world of education and academia. This later point may be considered as an important point for the writer, it is by highlighting the fact that the relationship is similar in a large number of commercial and non-commercial contexts that the author creates a true sense of credibility for the argument made. In addition, by citing the example of the relationship being present in education and academia, this has also given the writer the chance to consider how relevant the theory is in their own experience. In this case, personal reflection would seem to suggest that the writer as an individual has always in the past produced their greatest efforts when the expectations of teachers and tutors have been high.

However, the article does not stick to the consideration that the relationship between expectations and outcomes is always a positive one. A further section of the article goes into great detail on the subject of the low level of expectancy of success in sales people can lead to behaviour which results in a negative cycle of the self fulfilling prophecy. Again, upon personal reflection this is an element which the writer can personally identify with considering that in the past there have been times when the writer has

perhaps avoided situations which there was the perception of a the expectancy of failure rather than following through to the final outcome whether unsuccessful or not.

As such, the first part of the article suggest to the reader that perhaps the solution is that managers should simply adopt an outwardly positive image to their subordinates in order to create a positive upward cycle of behaviour. However, later elements of the article suggest that this could be more challenging than initially thought. Here Livingston (1988) considers evidence which states that it is difficult for managers to mask their true feelings and that managers are usually more efficient at communicating their negative views of employees than positive views. As such, one consideration is that employees will always come to perform based upon the true perception of a manager of their employee's capabilities rather than that of the expressed opinion of a manager. This considered, the writer questions the true value of the research, to what extent can the identification of such a relationship be of value if even the modification of the communications strategy of a manager does not serve as a tool to improve performance? Unfortunately, in the personal experience of the writer, would seem to support the evidence presented by Livingston (1988). In this case, the writer has personal experience of believing the communications used by an individual in a position of authority to considered as false. In such circumstances, not only has this not lead to higher levels of performance but in many cases the reduction in performance levels due to the consideration that the person in a

position of authority has breached the psychological contract by behaving in a dishonest way.

Despite the consideration that the relationship between expectations and performance levels is a universal one to be considered in the context of a wide range of professions and backgrounds, Livingston (1988) presents significant evidence to suggest that the relationship is by no means uniform in its effect. Here Livingston (1988) stresses the fact that the relationship may be seen as more distinct were younger demographics are considered whether this be in the education system or in junior level managers and those in the early stages of a career. As such, from a managerial perspective this would seem to suggest that companies should make significant efforts to see that high expectations are the norm within an organisation, especially in the context of junior level employees given the fact that such early development may shape the long term performance of an individual within an organisation.

Having reviewed the article, the writer comes to the conclusion that there is significant theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that there is a high positive correlation between expectations and performance levels within an organisation. This stated, the option of the writer is that managers should attempt to create positive working environments in which all members of staff treated as potential high performers regardless of previous experience or performance. Despite this consideration, the writer also acknowledges the limitations of the theory with a key distinction needing to be drawn between a genuine positive working environment which promotes high performance

behaviour with that of an environment in which managers attempt to project such positive message but in actual fact believe the opposite.

Livingston, J, S. (1988). Pygmalion in management. Harvard Business Review. September-October. 1988. pp1-12.