

Leaders Have Great Expectations

By Jim Clemmer

"Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

An old adage asks, "How am I expected to soar with the eagles when I'm surrounded by a bunch of turkeys?" This is a common victim statement, often heard from underperforming managers. Leaders see people as they could be – as eagles in training. Managers simply see them as turkeys. Research shows that both get what they expect.

In his Harvard Business Review classic "Pygmalion in Management," J. Sterling Livingston draws upon the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor 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 Doolittle explains, "The difference between a flower girl and a lady is not how she behaves, but how she is treated." Livingston presents a number of his own studies, as well as other research, to prove that "If a manager's expectations are high, productivity is likely to be excellent. If his expectations are low, productivity is likely to be poor."

What's now widely referred to as "The Pygmalion Effect" was pioneered by psychologist Robert Rosenthal at Harvard University. He told a group of students that high or low intelligence could be bred into laboratory rats through genetic manipulation. One group of students was given the "bright" rats. The other group of students was given the "dull" rats. When tested in their ability to navigate a maze, the bright rats dramatically outperformed the dull rats. What the students didn't know was that, in fact, there was no difference in the rats' intelligence levels. Both groups of rats were the same. The only variable was the expectations and emotional tone of the students handling the rats.

Robert Rosenthal later conducted the "Oak School experiment," which demonstrated how consistently held expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. At Oak School, teachers were told that a group of students had been specially tested and were "intellectual bloomers." Although they might start off slowly, they could be expected to show remarkable gains throughout the school year. At the end of the year the "bloomers" showed a substantial jump in IQ and academic achievement. Teachers reported that they were more friendly, outgoing, and eager to learn than their peers. Of course, the teachers had been misled. This group had not been specially tested. They were randomly selected from student lists.

On a personal level, I can attest that when people are treated well and with consideration, they usually respond in kind. Heather and I have lived in over half a

dozen homes since we married in 1977. Every neighborhood we've lived in has been full of kind, courteous and very thoughtful neighbors. There have been numerous parties, "newcomer clubs," casserole brigades, watching each other's homes, and the like. Heather is one of the kindest, most considerate human beings I know. She loves people and takes a deep interest in the lives and welfare of everyone she meets. Within weeks of moving into a new home she is organizing social or community events. She will drop everything to console someone in need or just be a good listening friend. One day, one of Heather's long-time friends said "You've lucked into a great neighborhood everywhere you've moved. We've never found a friendly neighborhood we've ever liked. Everyone is so cold and distant everywhere we go." Funny thing about Heather's luck, the more neighborly she is, the luckier she becomes in happening upon great neighborhoods.

Educational research supports the theory that we get what we expect from people. In his book, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, Robert Tauber, a professor of education at The Behrend College of the Pennsylvania State University at Erie, compiled over 700 doctoral dissertations and countless journal articles on stereotyping, perception of social differences, race, gender, ethnicity, body features, age, socioeconomic levels, special needs, and other personal and situational factors showing, "What we expect, all too often, is exactly what we get."

Jim Clemmer's practical leadership & personal growth books, workshops, and team retreats have helped hundreds of thousands of people worldwide improve personal, team, and organizational performance. Jim's web site, JimClemmer.com, has over 300 articles and dozens of video clips covering a broad range of topics on change, organization improvement, self-leadership, and leading others. Sign-up to receive Jim's popular monthly newsletter, and follow his leadership blog. Jim's international best-sellers include *The VIP Strategy*, *Firing on All Cylinders*, *Pathways to Performance*, *Growing the Distance*, *The Leader's Digest* and *Moose on the Table*. His latest book is *Growing @ the Speed of Change*.