

The Pygmalion Effect

When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.

Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

The above quote applies not only to things, but especially also to people. If you don't believe me, try the following experiment. Go to the bathroom and stand in front of the mirror. In your mind say to yourself "You are a problem." Note how you look at yourself in this state. Close your eyes for a moment, letting go of that thought. Now look again, saying to yourself, "you are worthy of love". Note how you look at yourself now. The visible changes you see may be very subtle, less so the changes you may have noted in other parts of your body, e.g. breathing, stomach, muscles. How we label and define things has a direct impact on how we experience them. If I tell myself that I am bad, I will feel bad. If I tell myself that someone else is a problem, I help to make them a problem. (If you find it difficult to do this experiment by yourself with a mirror, do it with a significant other.)

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (on which the musical *My Fair Lady* was based), Professor Henry Higgins insists that he can take a Cockney flower seller, Eliza Doolittle, and, with some intensive training, pass her off as a duchess. He succeeds. Eliza sums up the experience from her perspective in the following remark to Higgins' friend Colonel Pickering:

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will, but I know I can be a lady to you because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the power of the Pygmalion effect. In the best-known "Oak School" study, elementary school teachers were told in strictest confidence that certain (randomly selected) pupils in their classes were intellectual "bloomers," i.e. children whose intellectual potential was about to flower. The teachers were told not to disclose this information to anyone, especially not the pupils. They did not spend more time with these pupils or teach them different material, but within eight months the bloomers' IQ scores had increased significantly. The study authors, Rosenthal and Jacobson, summarize: "the change in the teachers' expectations regarding the intellectual performance of these allegedly 'special' children had led to an actual change in the intellectual performance of these randomly selected children."

Though the Pygmalion effect has mainly been researched in the teaching context, I believe that its power manifests itself equally in interpersonal communication. Consciously or not (and it is usually unconsciously) we tip people off to what we think of them when we communicate. Through subtle non-verbal cues such as dilating nostrils or tension of the lips, our counterpart (often viscerally) feels where s/he stands with us. Certain cues, such as tone of voice, are easy to perceive; micro-expressions lasting a split second can only be

consciously seen in slowed-down video recordings. All of these cues, however, are registered by our unconscious brains and responded to, often without our conscious brain getting involved.

Our brains are constantly taking in information and trying to make sense of it and order it. One of the ways we manage this flow of impressions is by putting them into categories. To do so we constantly make judgments and generalizations. While this is a natural capacity of our brains, we need to be wary of the negative effects of unconscious judgments about other people. If we have a negative experience with someone, we will often put that person immediately into a box labeled “difficult” or “aggressive” or “stubborn.” Sometimes we categorize people we haven’t even met, based on hearsay or prejudice. Often we are not even aware of the biases we may have against someone with a certain appearance or accent, but the bias is as much a part of the interaction with that individual as the Oak school teachers’ expectations were with the bloomers. Notice that in all of these cases the judgment relates to a person’s essence. We presume to define how another individual — or race or culture — “is.”

I have been asked in my interpersonal skills courses if it isn’t possible to just pretend to be civil to someone you actually think is a complete idiot. What do you think? Scan your memory for an occasion when you sensed that someone was not being authentic. You may not be able to say how, but you felt it. We nearly always detect any incongruence between the words and the behavior of our communication partner, and the non-verbal message is what we believe. You can control your voluntary expressions and thus ensure that you don’t grimace at someone you don’t like, but your involuntary expressions are not under your conscious control. Your unconscious can’t lie.

In addition to negative judgments about individuals we often make predictions about how they will respond, e.g. “I’m sure she won’t listen to me” or “I know exactly what he’ll say.” Not surprisingly, we frequently trigger the response we expect. If I approach a colleague with the conviction that he will respond aggressively to what I have to say, most likely he will. Thus I confirm my prejudice about this person, perpetuate the problem and continue to evade taking any responsibility for the quality of the interaction. I invite you to entertain the notion that we make the people we communicate with into who they are for us. They will rise or fall to our expectations of how they will behave. The Oak School study researched the virtuous cycle for ethical reasons, but the vicious cycle of the Pygmalion effect is much more prevalent.

If you have a difficulty with another person, there are two constructive approaches that I recommend, preferably together: address the problem and change your attitude toward that individual. Often a specific incident has led you to make a blanket judgment about the person. Only you can wipe that slate clean. Only you can decide to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. I believe that through constructive communication we can help each other grow and develop. Goethe captures this thought quite well: “Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.” Isn’t that how you’d like to be treated?