

## The Pygmalion Effect and Setting Incredible Expectations for Your Career and Life

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In your life, have you ever been around people who set either extremely high or extremely low expectations for you? It's important that you surround yourself with people who believe in you and what you can achieve. It is equally important that you distance yourself from people who believe, for whatever reason, you are not capable of achieving much.

In your career and personal life, you are going to be around both sets of people: people who believe in you and those who don't. What's so striking is just how much harm the people who don't believe in you can do and how much good the people who do believe in you can do. I would like you to think back on your life and the people who have believed in you and what you could accomplish. What did this do for your self esteem? How did this make you feel?

I know when people have believed in me and what I'm capable of, it has made all the difference. I notice they treat me differently and that I'm more eager to show them what I'm capable of. The opposite is also true. People who haven't believed in me have really brought me down. It's very difficult to deal with people who don't believe in you and what you can accomplish.

When I was in [high school](#), I was always exceptional at English related classes and then didn't do as good in classes that involved math. Eventually, when I got to college, I think I did better in math related classes than when I was in high school. When I was younger, I took an IQ test of some sort and did very, very well on the verbal part of the exam. I did so well, in fact, that every year my new teachers would make remarks like "according to your test scores, you are not living up to your potential," even if I got an A- in an English related sort of class. However, year after year I would get "Cs" and "B-'s" in all of my math-related classes.

One day, in front of an English class I was in, the teacher handed me back a test and it was an "A-." I was attending a [public school](#) in ninth grade called Grosse Pointe South High School and was only attending for the first few months of the school year before moving to Thailand with my family. I wasn't taking school all that seriously and really goofing off. Prior to handing out the test the teacher had written the the grades up on a blackboard without people's names so the class could see the distribution of the grades.

"You ought to do much better. You've got a lot more talent than this," the teacher said as she handed me back the test.

"I got the highest grade in the class!" I told her. "What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, but I've seen your aptitude scores for English and they are some of the best I've ever seen. You ought to get all A's and never "A-'s."

The reality was when I took the SATs, I ended up doing much better on math than the verbal. However, due to some aptitude test I took when I was younger, my teachers seemed to think I was some sort of verbal genius. I may have been lucky when I took this verbal related test when younger—who knows. What I do know is I heard about it on several occasions from teachers and I would estimate that it ended up influencing the way I was perceived all throughout middle school and high school.

I think it also influenced the way I perceived myself.

George Bernard Shaw's play, "Pygmalion" tells the story of Henry Higgins, a professor of phonetics, who makes a bet with his friend Colonel Pickering that he can teach a poor flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, from a lower class background to speak and act like the an upper-class lady. In the process of the training, Higgins and Doolittle become close but she ends up rejecting him and decides to marry Freddy Eyrnsford-Hill, a man who is poor but a gentleman.

"Pygmalion" is loosely based upon Greek mythology. In Ovid's "Metamorphoses," Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with a statue he made. He offers the statue presents and eventually prays to Venus (Aphrodite) and she brings the statue to life. Pygmalion marries the statue and they end up having a son.

The idea behind the Pygmalion effect is that people will internalize the expectations of their superiors and, in this respect, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The idea is that students with poor expectations internalize their negative labels and those with positive labels succeed. This is something that was extensively studied in what is known as the Rosenthal-Jacobson study (the "Study"). The study is described in the book "Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupils' Intellectual Development" (1968; expanded edition 1992).

In the Study, teachers at a school were told that the IQ of their students had been measured and one set of their fifth grade class would develop much faster than the other. However, the students were actually randomly selected and there was no truth to what the teachers were being told. The purpose of the test was to support the idea that reality can be influenced by what others expect. The hypothesis of the study was that when someone approached something with a bias, they will create what is essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result.

Without going into too many specifics, the Study showed that when teachers expect students will do well and grow intellectually, they do. When teachers believe students are unintelligent and won't do well, they do not. In the Study, at the end of the year the students that had teachers that were led to believe would do well, showed significantly greater intellectual growth than the control group. The degree of difference that was found was significant at the end of the year:

First graders in the control group showed a gain of twelve IQ points and students in the experimental group showed a gain of 27.4 points. Overall, in grades first through six, the experimental group showed a 12.22 point gain compared to a 8.42 point gain for the control group.

The main idea of the Pygmalion effect is that if you believe someone will achieve this or that, then they are more likely to. Through the Pygmalion Effect, teachers can create better students just by believing in them. For example, if a teacher that

has no previous experience with a student is told that he's brilliant and very intelligent, the new teacher will likely be more supportive, teach the student more challenging material, be more patient with the student, and give the student more feedback. Consequently, the student will likely learn more. The student's true level of intelligence doesn't matter as much as whether or not the teacher believes the student is bright or not.

What does this have to do with your career and your life?

First, the lesson is that the beliefs others hold about you often have a lot to do with what's going to end up happening to you. If someone believes you're capable of something, then you're more likely to end up being able to achieve it. This is just how it works.

If people are saying good things about you and holding high expectations for you, then you're likely to end up much better than people who feel the opposite. Have you ever had a job or been in a relationship where the employer or person you are in the relationship with thought you could do nothing right? I certainly have. It was no fun at all. It didn't make me feel good about myself. I was depressed and had very low expectations for what I could achieve. When I look back at my life, I can see that some of the worst times I've ever had were when I was in jobs or in relationships with people who didn't like me or have faith in what I could accomplish.

I want to be clear that a lot of problems you may have had in your life may not have everything or much at all to do with you. Instead, these problems have a lot to do with the people around you. I know this may not be something that makes you completely accountable for your actions, but this is true. Some of the people who may have "done a number on you" include:

- Your teachers
- Your parents
- Your relatives
- Your employer
- Your friends
- You neighbors
- Your schools

You may have been segmented and put into certain roles due to your social class, who your parents were, what others have falsely said about you, your race, your religion, and more. This is true and it's not something that's meant to make you happy. Additionally, other people may have put you in one negative role or another because it makes them feel better about themselves. This is just the way it is.

You need to be aware that others may have messed with you, and this is likely affecting your life right now.

What do you do in this situation? In most cases, what I personally have done is just continued on with my life and learned to shut out people's negative opinions of me. I continue in the face of adversity and I don't let it bother me. When you prove people wrong who want to have low expectations of you, their response usually is that they don't want to have much to do with you anymore. Who cares? You cannot afford to surround yourself with people who want, for whatever reason, to set limits on what you can achieve.

About a year ago, we started making various videos for some of our [job websites](#). One of the most popular videos we made was a "keyword video." Essentially, these videos are short, 3-4 minute videos that announce that one of our various websites contains a certain type of job. For example, one job might be "a [corporate attorney job](#) in Sacramento." A broadcaster would get up and talk about how one of our websites contained this sort of job and the video would be complete. They would then do some editing to the video and that's it. For months and months, I assumed that no one could possibly film and edit more than 20 of these videos per day.

At first, I only had broadcasters doing these videos in Malibu. Within a few months, however, I built a small studio in Pasadena and decided to send all of the Malibu broadcasters to Pasadena and hire an entirely new group of broadcasters for Malibu. I told the new group of broadcasters I hired that they were expected to do 40 of these videos per day and that this was easily obtainable.

What happened to me was amazing. The broadcasters who believed they could do 20 videos continued doing this amount. The new broadcasters who had no contact with the broadcasters in Pasadena were told they could do 40 videos per day, and they ended up doing 40. The ones who did 40 figured out how to be more efficient with their time and do things in a more productive way. What we believe people are capable of and what we honestly think they can become have powerful effects on the way things turn out.

Second, the most important lesson is that if other's beliefs about us can impact what happens to us, an even more important thing that will impact what happens to us is our beliefs about ourselves. Nothing at all is more important than what we believe about ourselves. In fact, our beliefs about ourselves are even more important than anything that anyone else has to say about us.

One of my wife's relatives goes to Alcoholics Anonymous ("AA") meetings daily, from what I understand. Growing up, I also knew someone quite well who used to go to these meetings all the time, and when I was an asphalt contractor I had an employee I used to drop off at these meetings on a nightly basis after work. I have never been to an AA meeting. However, from what I've witnessed from a distance, these meetings are something that many people are quite religious about. In fact, from what I understand, there are an incredible number of people out there who go to these meetings on a daily basis.

The idea behind organizations like AA is that the people are alcoholics, drug addicts, or whatever and need the support of other people. Relapse and getting back on drugs or alcohol is something they need to avoid at all costs. However, because this is in "their nature" relapses happen and people then are rehabilitated again over time by AA until another relapse happens. The idea that I have witnessed for how substance abuse is dealt with is the people who have a substance abuse problem are classified as "alcoholics" or "drug addicts" and so forth and presumably never recover.

Before commenting on this, I've also known several diabetics growing up and over the years who can't eat any form of sugar. Now, I'm not an expert in diabetes by any stretch of the imagination, but I do realize there are different forms of diabetes—some people cannot eat any sugar and other people need to control their sugar. I have known diabetics who couldn't eat any sugar, which means they had to avoid various carbohydrates and other foods which metabolize into sugar. What these people do is simply not eat any of this food at all. They stop and they are done. They don't go to support groups to talk about how they can no longer eat sugar and then relapse. They simply stop when the doctor tells them it is prohibited

and they are done. When they go out to eat, they don't eat foods containing sugar. When they order something to drink, they do the same thing. No meetings and no relapses.

Now, I am not an expert in chemical dependency by any stretch of the imagination, but it does seem to me that there is something wrong with sending people who have a problem with alcohol or whatever to a group that tells them they are alcoholics each day as part of the treatment. Associating with and being labeled as something is only likely to reinforce the person's belief that they are the negative thing they do not want to be. In order for someone not to be addicted to drugs or alcohol, why not try and change their identity as a person? Until the person sees themselves as someone different they are unlikely to change. This is probably why people who go to AA and all of these sorts of rehabilitation centers constantly relapse. It has everything to do with how they see themselves. Until they believe they are someone different, then they probably will never recover at all.

They need to believe they aren't addicts and believe they are something else. Someone who detests drugs or alcohol, for example. A model of fitness. A model of sobriety.

The problem with allowing ourselves to believe negative things about ourselves, and being the subject of other people's negative beliefs about ourselves, is that we will generally act in a manner consistent with this. A lot of how we act in the world is an effort to be consistent with how we see ourselves. We expect people to be consistent with what we believe they are. We also want to be consistent with how we see ourselves. Most of us define ourselves based on what other people tell us we are like.

You need to decide right now how you want to be. Then you need to believe you are that person and capable of being the person you really want to be. Who are you? Who do you want to be? Describe yourself as the person you want to be and then start acting like that person. The biggest challenge for you to succeed in your career and life is not knowing who you really are. You need to be the person you want to be and you need to think big. You need to surround yourself with people who also share that vision for you and who you are. Start behaving and being like the person you want to be right now. Your life is defined by your beliefs and the perception of who you are.

You need to decide:

- Are you your past, or are you who you decide to be now?
- Are you what others say you are, or who you want to be?

What you're going to feel and what you are going to become in the future isn't based on what's happened to you in the past and what others have said about you, but on your interpretation of that information. You need to interpret your life going forward in a positive way that empowers you—and not the other way around.

#### **THE LESSON**

You will come across both people who believe in you and those who do not in your life. It's vital that you surround yourself with those who believe in you and what you can achieve. The beliefs of others dictate what ends up happening to you, so it's equally important to avoid those who don't believe in you. Define yourself in terms of the person you want to be, and start acting like that person.

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