

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

PYGMALION AND PERCEPTION: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

Albert S. King, Northern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

An experiential exercise emphasizing the crucial part of perceptions in the Pygmalion Process, and individual/group perception experiments to become aware of perceptual blocks to high expectancy effects is presented. Implications of how supervisors unblock barriers are explored.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

To become familiar with the characteristic traits of Pygmalion-like supervisors and how to unblock perceptual barriers for holding and communicating high expectancy for employee performance.

Advance Preparation and Review

Read the article, "Supervisor's Expectations--How They Affect Trainee Performance" [3, pp. 87-89]. Think about your own experience in directing employees in work organizations to date. What particular problems do supervisors encounter with regard to setting standards and communicating them for purposes of influencing employee performance?

Obviously, supervisors' expectations are highly important in shaping employee performance. The real questions are, "How does one learn to be a more effective communicator of high expectancy?" "Do high expectancy supervisors perceive and respond to employees and their work performance in any unusual ways?" "What are their characteristic capacities and traits of communication?" This exercise focuses on becoming consciously aware of the means by which supervisors can overcome perceptual barriers to holding and communicating high standards and expectations having self-fulfilling effects on employee performance.

Procedure

Step 1. Fill Out your responses to Part A, Individual Perception. When you have completed it, wait for other members to finish. Do not proceed any further.

Step 2. Divide the class into random groups of five people sitting at the same table or adjacent desks. Compare and discuss the results of members' responses considering the highlight points for group discussion (Part B).

Step 3. Complete the group exercises following stage by stage instructions in the groups joined (Part C).

Step 4. Discuss the group results considering the highlight points for group discussion (Part D)

Step 5. Entire class discussion--consider points to highlight class discussion (Part E)

Step 6. Read the Summary Conceptualization and select one group to report on overall exercise.

A. Individual Perception

1. Standing underneath any light coming from the ceiling, observe the profile of your own shadow that is cast upon the floor or a large piece of paper that is lying in front. Return to your seat and draw your shadow exactly as you saw it.

2. Look at each of the photos, figures, and sketches shown and write your responses to the questions on the lines provided.



In this photo, what do you see?

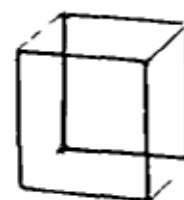
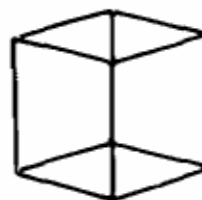
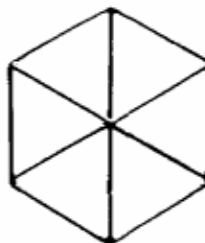
Describe _____



Is there anything wrong with this phrase?

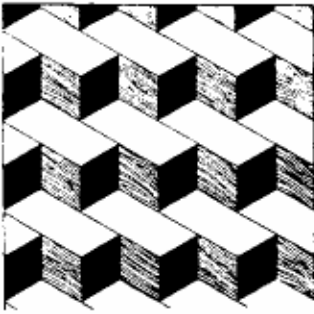
Explain _____

How many views do you see in each of these cubes?



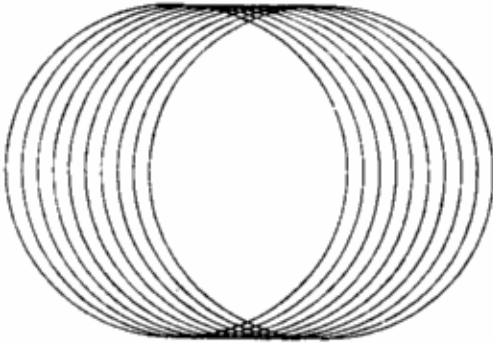
Explain _____

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Are the white sides of these blocks on top or on bottom? _____

Explain _____



Is the position of these rings from left to right or right to left? _____

Explain _____



(A)



(B)

Do you see any difference in photos A and B? _____

Explain the difference _____

Select the photo that you prefer as most appealing. A or B? _____

Explain the reason for your choice. What is the possible meaning? _____

DO NOT PROCEED BEYOND THIS POINT UNTIL ALL MEMBERS HAVE FINISHED, THEN PROCEED.

B. Individual Perception Critique

In groups of five members, compare and discuss the results of your responses to the individual perception experiments. Consider the following points to highlight and guide your group discussion:

1. What psychological properties and characteristics are involved?
2. Do members see their own drawing or any of the figures differently?
3. Do members see any errors or omissions by any member of the group?
4. Can other members point these differences in perception out?
5. What is the connection between the psychological processes involved here and the interpersonal process of communication?
6. What similarities and analogies can be drawn between capacities of perception and characteristics of expectancy?

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7. Is there any possible connection between perception and expectation of objects and of people?

8. Is there any possible connection between the perceptual and expectancy characteristics you have discussed and capacities of holding and communicating these to others?

9. How are these characteristics likely to be communicated?

C. Individual Description (Group Exercises)

1. In the groups formed, each member should think of a recent co-worker with whom you: (a) least like to be with, (b) least like to work with and (c) would rate as being lowest in overall job performance. By considering your reasons for a, b, and c (DO NOT INDICATE THE PERSON'S NAME), take a few minutes to write a brief description of this person's behavior and performance. Use the space below. Wait until everyone in your group has finished to continue the exercise.

2. Now pass this description to the member on your right. Each member is to read over the description, looking for anything that can be added to it. In making this addition, however, think of a recent co-worker with whom you would: (a) most like to be with, (b) most like to work with and (c) would rate as being highest in overall job performance. By considering your reasons for a, b, and (DO NOT INDICATE THE PERSON'S NAME), take a few minutes to write a brief description of this person's behavior and performance. Use the space below. Wait until everyone in your group has finished to continue the exercise.

3. Each member should pass the completed descriptions (Part C - 1 and 2) back to the member on the left who wrote the original description. Looking over both descriptions, briefly explain in the space below what a supervisor of this "new" person should require or expect of their performance.

4. Group discussion. Briefly critique your group's results and continue to the next stage.

5. Members in each group should count off from 1 through 5. Even numbered members of the groups should think of a least preferred co-worker and odd numbered members of the group consider a most preferred coworker. Each person in the group writes a one-line sentence describing the behavior and/or performance of the co-worker they have in mind. Pass these single line descriptions to the left. Each member should read the line and add the first line of your own that comes to mind. Fold the paper so that only the bottom line (your last line) is visible and pass it along to the next person. When members of the group have written 3 to 4 lines, quit passing, and return the papers to the members writing the first line. Use the spaces below.

6. Group discussion. In turn, have each member read aloud a paper to the group. Briefly critique results.

D. Highlight Points for Discussion of Group Exercises

1. What elements of experience and expectations are involved?

2. How do these elements account for the results?

3. How does your own past knowledge and individual experience inhibit setting high expectations?

4. How does past experience of others inhibit holding high expectations?

5. How does your own and others' experience facilitate holding higher expectations?

6. What constraints and obstacles have to be overcome in holding and communicating high expectancy?

7. What satisfactions and disappointments are likely to be encountered in holding high expectancies?

8. What creative processes are required in holding and communicating high expectancies that extend beyond mere description in a group exercise setting?

E. Points to Highlight Class Discussion (entire class)

1. How much agreement is there on the various insights gained from the exercise and group discussions? Can we expect unanimity? Why or why not?

2. Should standards and expectations vary within organizations, between supervisors, or within the same supervisor?

3. Are there any differences between holding high standards for employees' performance and having the ability to communicate these in ways that are self fulfilling?

4. What factors should be considered in establishing policies and incentives regarding supervisors' expectations and standards?

5. Should supervisors' expectations lead or follow in shaping employee work performance? Why? Under what conditions? Why not?

6. As a supervisor, how do you come to set high standards and communicate high expectations for employees who are low achievers in performance? For high achievers? What are the differences?

7. Are expectations for high achievers communicated differently than those for low achievers?

8. Are some supervisors more accurate and sensitive communicators of expectancy? Are some employees more Sensitive recipients of expectancy influence?

SUMMARY AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

A basic connotation of the word "expectation" (from "ex" meaning out and "spectre" meaning to see) or outlook is the concept of perception. Perception, the most critical process in generating or blocking the flow of expectancy affecting employee performance is a creative process much like communication between people. Try too hard to control it--and ignore what employees are saying and doing--and supervisors are likely to fail.

Experienced supervisors know that they cannot impose their will on the perceptual process: they must let it lead them. Pygmalion-like supervisors talk about the absence of preconceptions, an attitude of exploring and overseeing employee behavior without trying to reach a predetermined goal: "When I supervise," an effective supervisor remarked, "my objective is to show employees what I have found, not what I was looking for." S. Livingston of Harvard Business School identifies the Pygmalion manager as one who is able to recognize and capitalize on an accidental combination of skills and talents in personnel [7, pp. 81-90].

Those having the most difficulty in understanding the link between perception and mediation of expectancy influence seem to rely heavily on their knowledge and experience rather than what they see with their own

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eyes. In drawing their own shadows from the floor, as they stand under a light, many insist on drawing a neck on the figure, although in that position the neck can't be seen. The concept they have in their head interferes with what is in front of them. While analogous mistakes may not easily extrapolate to employee relations, managers may have a hard time in convincing supervisors to look only for what they see, not what they know--while holding high expectations for employees' performance [6, p. 248].

Effective communicators of high expectancy perceive employees in unique ways. They seem more fluid in their ability to reverse figure and ground in what they perceive or think about. The figure-ground illusions were designed to demonstrate how we structure what we see. Each illusion contains mutually exclusive (reversible) perceptions: when one is seen, the other does not exist. Switching perceptions requires relaxed concentration, effortless attention. The viewer becomes immersed in the figure, and the eyes seem to wander in and out of it. Reversing cannot be accomplished by an act of will; we must wait for it to happen. Somewhat analogously in employee relations, the supervisor achieves perceptual freedom by gaining access to both expectancy (figure) and experience (ground), which helps to integrate higher expectancy and background performance as employees develop.

Supervisors likely reveal their expectations by way of cues and symbols which are so slight that employees cannot begin to articulate them. The pair of seemingly identical photos were used to demonstrate how nonverbal visual cues serve to mediate high expectancy and dramatize this subtle effect. The two photos are identical except that one was modified to make the pupil sizes of the eyes larger than the other. Many will notice a difference between the photos, but will not be able to specify what that difference is. It is natural to ask why most will tend to select the photo with larger pupil size as their preference. One highly persuasive psychological explanation is that large pupil size serves not only to reflect, but to communicate favorable attitudes and expectations [1, p. 3761]. There is a continuum of responses ranging from large dilation for favorable attitudes to extreme contraction or "pinpoints of hate" for unfavorable feelings toward another person. Clearly, eye contact serves as a remarkable indicator of attitude, interest, and expectations supervisors hold for employees. Most likely, expectations are communicated without any awareness by supervisor or employee. Although supervisors may not be aware of the subtleties involved, these complex and unnoticed nonverbal cues may be operating to shape employee motivations and performance.

When shown both figure-ground illusions and pupil size illustrations, some will perceive the contrasts quickly. Others may seem fixated on only one figure, and/or find it hard to spot the differences in photos, even when other members point it out to them. Others will simply hold that there is no connection between exercises in perception of nonverbal human cues (not to mention objects) and communication of expectancy influence. This insensitivity to nonverbal symbols and rigidity in perception is a major contributor to the creative blocks encountered in separating the relationship between expectancy and experience.

The group exercises on describing least and most preferred co-workers point out the problems faced in starting the flow of expressing high expectancy independent of past experience and involvement with employees. It is easy to say, "Ignore your inner critics of past experience," "Respond to what is in front of you, not so your preconceptions from past experience." But this is hard to do. The group exercises were designed to be especially useful in helping you see how

these inner critics of past experience inhibit the process of holding and communicating high expectancy. First, a least preferred co-worker was described followed by the more positive experience of describing one more favorably perceived. This shifting frame of reference, of looking over someone else's negative experience and then adding favorably to it produces incongruent contrasts marked by ambivalence. There were no instructions of what to strive for, only to look over another's experience and add to it. When comparing these descriptions, some will find they have little difficulty in "breaking" and adding someone else's experience with their own. They may find both descriptions equally interesting. The unfavorable descriptions often have harsher adjectives, use less space, and seem stronger; the more favorable impressions are more delicate, use more space, and appear lighter. Overall, group members usually like both sets of descriptions equally and find humorous difficulty in recognizing any continuity, although they find it surprising that someone else can describe something appealing about an unfavorable human relations experience. Being asked to indicate what a supervisor of the "new" employee should require and expect arouses ambiguity and dissonance. Some may feel this spontaneity and freedom of expression are gone. They worry about disappointment of what to expect and of not having expectations fulfilled [4, p. 221].

When asked about what to expect of the "new" person's performance, members have difficulty responding. When we try to expect what is required from conflicting experiences, the descriptions seem dull and reflect participants' feelings of discomfort.

Carl Jung, working with his own creations and those of his patients, claimed that it is the reconciliation of opposites that promotes growth and personality integration. We integrate these opposites in our work, and later absorb them as part of our self-concept--making it wider, richer, more encompassing. By taking this larger view of ourselves, we learn to tolerate inconsistencies and ambiguities in ourselves as well as in others [2, p. 54].

High expectancy supervisors must have the ego strength to tolerate ambiguity and not force experience with employee performance into a preconceived mold. Research on high expectancy supervisors shows them to score high on tests of tolerance for ambiguity [5, p. 497]. Pygmalion supervisors apparently have less need to make themselves and the world around them stable.

The final group exercise shows the creative advantages of responding freely to what is in front of you rather than making it fit some preconceived idea. Each member in the group received a sheet of paper with a short positive or negative description written at the top. As individual descriptions are added, the idea is to discover whether members approach each new sentence without preconceived notions or let the previous sentence determine your response. Those who are able to do this easily say they feel exhilarated. They realize they have an enormous reservoir of experience to draw from in responding to the description and enjoy letting it out appropriately and effortlessly. Those finding the exercise difficult are torn between expressing their own ideas and the demands of the previous de- Sc r i Pt ion.

In a recent training program, one supervisor said that her highest expectations occur when she loses her sense of herself and negative past experiences. The sentence exercise calls for this same loss of identity; it asks individuals to forget who they are and what has happened in the past, and respond to what is in front of them.

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The exercise produces a flow of communication that may be stable and continuous or mixed and disjointed. Participants report that it usually takes awhile to turn the situation from a struggle to an easy pleasurable interchange with the descriptions. Some of the comments may, and usually will, parallel what Pygmalion supervisors in the field say when their employees' work is going well.

When most members of the group renouncing the negative descriptions manage to reach this positive open state, the results are striking. When read entirely, the descriptions do not appear to have been produced by different individuals, each responding only to the last sentence. (The pattern, of course, may appear broken and incongruous or follow a single negative or positive theme.) But the tone set by the first favorable description--dramatic, playful, skillful, hopeful--is carried through the entire sequence in an optimistic way.

Trying to make employee performance fit preconceived ideas often produces barriers to communicating high expectancy. Other mistakes can have a similar blocking effect: rigidity of perception, a need to control employees, a need to maintain a certain concept of them; forcing experience on expectancy; setting low expectations for fear of being discouraged with what employees produce; starting to evaluate employees too soon, before expression of expectancy has run its course--all stand in the way of the detachment and separation required for real communication of high expectancy.

Supervisors have been heard to say they hold high Standards and expectancies because they need to express themselves. In fact, just the reverse is true. What they need comes back to them from their expectancy. One Supervisor asked others in a class, "What do you usually do when you feel blocked in your expectations?" A large number said they eat production problems of low employee performance. It is the Self-nourishment of the self-fulfilling expectancy encounter that we long for, not the need to give nourishment by communicating something to others.

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