

# Researchers examine 'great expectations' in the workplace

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Researchers at Tel Aviv University have found that employee performance in the workplace, like students' grades at school, is greatly influenced by managers' expectations of that performance.

An analysis of results from twenty-five years' worth of experimental research conducted at banks, schools, the Israel Defense Forces – and even summer camp – shows unequivocal results: when a leader expects subordinates to perform well, they do.

“A self-fulfilling prophecy goes into effect,” says Prof. Dov Eden from Tel Aviv University's Faculty of Management, who conducts and directs the experiments. “Managers and leaders would be well-advised to expect a lot, and let people know they expect a lot. The message should be genuine and consistent.”

## Expectations Feed Performance

In one of Prof. Eden's experiments, he divided bank branch managers into two groups. One group of managers was told that their employees were exceptional; the other group was told nothing about their employees' performance potential.

When Prof. Eden analyzed performance results, he found a significant difference between the branches. There had been no pre-existing differences between employees, but the branch managers who were led to expect more, got more — their branches scored higher in terms of

profitability and overall economic success.

This effect has been found in dozens of organizations: high expectations have a positive effect in business and in many other social arenas, Prof. Eden says.

### A “Pygmalion” Effect

His findings confirm beyond any reasonable doubt that the “Pygmalion Effect” can be created among leaders and subordinates. Subordinates get a 3-to-1 boost in their performance success rate if a leader expects more from them, says Prof. Eden. “Success” is determined by any number of relevant factors, such as completing a course, a performance rating on the job, or grades in a training program.

But “if a leader has high expectations, it doesn’t mean that a subordinate will perform three times as well,” Prof. Eden says. “It means that he or she will have a three times greater chance of being above-average.”

### A Boost of Confidence

Study results indicate that when a manager expects a lot from an employee, the manager’s leadership style changes and subsequently boosts the employee’s self-confidence. “If your boss believes you can excel, you are more likely to believe in your own capacity to succeed,” says Prof. Eden.

The result holds true for any supervisory position, adds Prof. Eden, who has studied this phenomenon at banks, in schools among principals and teachers, at summer camps among counsellors and campers, in university-based tutorial programs and in the military among commanders and their subordinates.

The Pygmalion research expands on studies of the “experimenter effect” in the 1960s, the notion that an investigator can unintentionally influence the outcome of an experiment in significant ways.

The recipe for success, says Prof. Eden, is to “expect a lot from people. You'll get more. Have high expectations and reinforce them with positive messages to the employee, even if it requires being a good actor.”

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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