

I THINK I CAN, I KNOW I CAN!

There's an article that appeared in a New York newspaper which I have often used in training to illustrate a point about belief systems. It was a story which went "She met him in a singles' bar and they talked for a while. He offered her a drink and she enjoyed his company. Then he offered to drop her back home. While driving back, she realized that they were moving through narrow and strange roads. 'Oh God where is he taking me?' she thought but did not have the guts to ask. She cursed her decision to get into his car. All of a sudden she saw him taking a turn back into the highway just near her house. Smiling, he said: 'I took a short cut'."

Chances are the story did not end the way you expected it to. And how you expected it to end reflects your belief system. No belief is right or wrong but it can be either empowering or limiting. Our individual belief systems are formed through a complex combination of nurture (upbringing and the intangible influence of our collective subconscious), nature (our own innate personality) and life experiences (past incidents which we take on board and give general credence to). For example, as a kid if one dog bit you, you believed all dogs to be dangerous and treated them accordingly, with suspicion and fear. So a belief sets up a behaviour pattern and to change a particular behaviour pattern, you must first identify the beliefs associated with it and begin altering them. That way a new pattern is automatically created.

A furious manager confided in me the other day that he may as well do everything himself because quite frankly it would be cheaper, more efficient and most importantly be done right. It is quite sad to hear such a level of despondency from a senior manager but he is not alone. Nor is the employee who confided "let him do it because then perhaps he'd understand the difficulties we face."

The divide in perceptions between master and slave is no new thing. Ever since God told Adam and Eve to toe the line there has been resistance to instruction and misaligned mindsets. There is no greater conflict witnessed on a day-to-day basis than that between management and staff. But from where did this belief spring that all managers are monsters and staff a pain in the 'you know where'?

In my view all too often what we expect from people is exactly what we get. When employees enter the workplace with a conviction that managers are there to exploit and manipulate and conversely managers believe that employees are lazy and troublesome then by some mysterious force it comes about and becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. It shows how expectations of people and their expectations of themselves are the key factors in what behaviors they will exhibit. There is plenty of evidence to support this phenomenon.

In the early 20th century, there existed a very strange and unique horse named Clever Hans. Hans could add, subtract, multiply, divide, spell and solve problems involving musical harmony, giving his answers even in the absence of his trainer by tapping his hoof. It mystified almost everyone. However when Hans could not see his questioner his cleverness seemed to vanish. It was discovered that without intention people were prompting Hans, subconsciously communicating the answers through visible signs. Hans was only clever when people expected him to be and they projected their expectations of superior horse sense onto him.

Around the same time, George Bernard Shaw's was writing his play, Pygmalion, a psychological study of the influence of nature versus nurture and the false perceptions that result from superficial assumptions. The main character, Professor Henry Higgins, insists that he can take a common flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, and 're-invent' her by subjecting her to intense training to pass her off in high society as a Duchess. This he does with great aplomb and the subsequent sudden change in her status and deference she is accorded is now referred to as Pygmalion effect. As Eliza says, the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated.'

The self fulfilling prophecy or Pygmalion Effect was described by J. Sterling Livingston in the September/October, 1988 *Harvard Business Review*. "The way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them." He goes on to say how once our expectations are set, even if they are inaccurate, we act in ways that are consistent with the expectation and thus make the expectation come true!

At work the way that we "see" people and the individual's opinion about his or her ability and self-expectations largely determine performance. Just as Eliza grew into her role the more she was taken to be of high-born lineage, if an employee thinks she can succeed, she will likely do so. Consequently, any actions the supervisor can take that increase the employee's feelings of positive self-worth, will help the employee's performance improve. This surely turns everything on its head and puts the onus squarely on the shoulders of management - if employees are not performing then it is partly because managers unwittingly are creating the situation from their pre-conceived lack of confidence and trust.

Ever heard the story of the four-minute mile? For years people believed that it is impossible for a human being to run a mile in less than four minutes until Roger Banister proved it wrong in 1954. Within one year, 37 runners had followed his lead and the year after that, 300 other runners did the same thing. The invisible barrier had been removed.

And what about the placebo effect? People who are told a drug will have a certain effect will many times experience it even when given a dummy pill without those properties.

So often success is simply a case of mind over matter – self-belief and fulfillment of the confidence others place in you. So I say, think positive, believe in people and their ability to surprise, to exceed expectations and to achieve the impossible. Inspire your staff and imbue them with the confidence to respond and succeed. Or would you rather be the manager who bemoans his life lot in life and the under-performing staff he has, all the while perpetuating the poor performance by projecting his low expectations onto his subordinates? Never realizing that in management as in so many other activities, it's the thought that counts!

