

The Universe Conspiring and the Pygmalion Effect

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In his novel, *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho wrote his most famous quote — “*And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.*” There has been much support and as much criticism for his words. Personally, I have experienced times when I desire something and try to attain it, I do all the right things and all the right things seem to happen to me. I wondered if this was an observation or confirmation bias. Here I propose one of the mechanisms by which your belief in yourself and your dedication can make it seem like the universe is conspiring to help you.

Firstly let me be clear — I don’t believe that a personal wish, a personal struggle to attain something will change the universe. What changes is you and your response to external stimuli. People’s behaviour toward you is something that is rather difficult to change, they are most likely behaving to you the way they always have. However, how you respond to them, how you take their inputs and criticism — that can change very dramatically.

The **Pygmalion effect** is a psychological phenomenon in which high expectations lead to improved performance in a given area. It's an easy thought experiment. Imagine you are the teacher for a classroom of high school students. You see one student in the front row — well dressed, neat with a pen in his pocket and a book open on his desk. And then you spot another student who seems to be quite the opposite of the first — sitting in the back row, staring out the window, seemingly without a care in the world. In your head, subconsciously, you expect much more from the first student than the second. And this changes your behavior toward these students. When the first student scores highly in a test, you laude them with praise. When the second student does better than usual, you suspect them of cheating. When the first makes a mistake, you patiently correct them. When the second makes a mistake, you tell them off. I’m sure all of us have seen this in the classroom in some form or the other.

Now what does your behaviour do for these students? The first student sees that you treat him with respect and believe him to be smart. This will certainly please him and motivate him to study. He enjoys class and never misses any. He is active during class — he is confident about voicing his doubts as he knows you will not treat him with disrespect. In contrast, the second student sees that you treat him with disrespect and consider him to be stupid. This certainly is not encouraging. He does not enjoy class and wants to skip it dearly. He does not voice his doubts in class for fear of humiliation. Because of the students’ natural response to the external stimuli (your behavior toward them), the first student improves his grades and is happy with school. The second student is unable to study and his scores degrade. This reinforces your belief that the first student is smart and the second student is stupid. You knew it! Your intuition was spot on! This is the Pygmalion effect.

The following excerpt from Wikipedia summarizes the study conducted by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson who formulated this effect:

All students in a single California elementary school were given a disguised IQ test at the beginning of the study. These scores were not disclosed to teachers. Teachers were told that some of their students

(about 20% of the school chosen at random) could be expected to be "intellectual bloomers" that year, doing better than expected in comparison to their classmates. The bloomers' names were made known to the teachers. At the end of the study, all students were again tested with the same IQ test used at the beginning of the study. All six grades in both experimental and control groups showed a mean gain in IQ from before the test to after the test. However, first- and second-graders showed statistically significant gains favoring the experimental group of "intellectual bloomers". This led to the conclusion that teacher expectations, particularly for the youngest children, can influence student achievement. Rosenthal believed that even attitude or mood could positively affect the students when the teacher was made aware of the "bloomers". The teacher may pay closer attention to and even treat the child differently in times of difficulty.

Of course, the real world is hardly an interaction between just a supervisor and the supervised. Aside from your teachers, you have your friends, parents, siblings, neighbours, cousins and many others who believe in a different version of you, and behave to you according to their distinct beliefs. All of these are external stimuli to which, by the Pygmalion Effect we are all subject to with varying degrees of effect. You certainly care more about what your parents and teachers think about you than a distant relative.

The Pygmalion effect tries to frame how your opinion about a person and hence your behaviour toward them create a force which tries to mould them to fit to your expectations. But there is another stimulus, an internal one. You have an opinion about yourself as well. You have things you believe about yourself, things you think you are and are not. If this internal stimuli has the same effect on you as the external one, then the conclusion would be this — *Your* opinion about yourself will create a force which tries to mould *you* to fit *your* expectations.

A very satisfying result. In fact, I am very happy to tell you that Coelho knew this mechanism as well. In his book, *The Witch of Portobello*, he says — “*You are what you believe yourself to be.*” This is certainly not new wisdom. The book of Proverbs says — “*For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.*” (Proverbs 23:7)

So what if you believed in yourself, and cared more about what you think about yourself over other external stimuli? Would your belief in yourself motivate you to work harder, produce better results and reaffirm your self-belief? The answer is yes, it *can*. This is called **self-efficacy**, where your own high expectations and belief in your abilities improve your performance.

That said, this is no guarantee that believing in yourself and working towards your goals alone will suffice. No matter how much a pig wishes to fly, no matter how much it practices leaping about, it is forever doomed to stay bound to the earth. Which tells you there are achievable and unachievable things in this world, these likely change from person to person. Self-efficacy is applicable only to achievable goals.

It is self-efficacy, working through the Pygmalion cycle (belief → action → results → reaffirm belief) that I propose is the working principle behind the feeling of the universe conspiring to help you achieve your goals. The belief in yourself makes you fruitful. When things work out the way you want it to, of course it feels like the world is for you, not against. Believing in yourself can possibly change you and

your life situations — seemingly magically. It sure looks like the whole universe heard your wish and decided to comply.

It is not easy to be confident, it is not so easy to believe in yourself in the light of past failures. It is natural. But spending time doubting yourself, questioning everything and demotivating yourself will certainly take its toll. Persistent self-doubt can become its own self-fulfilling prophecy