



By Mary Taylor, CEO at Mary Taylor and Associates

# HARNESSING THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

## A simple strategy for exponential performance gains

A ‘bread-and-butter’ challenge for companies is how to get the best from their staff. For employees themselves, the goal is no different; most people want to perform at their best and achieve their career aspirations.

There are, of course, numerous ways to try to go about this – some more demanding and more successful than others. Utilising the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ can be an inexpensive, ‘fast-track’ route to exponentially improving employee performance – yet it is frequently overlooked.

In essence, the self-fulfilling prophecy refers to the phenomenon that a person’s beliefs, expectations or predictions (positive or negative) about themselves influence their behaviour in such a way that the expectation or belief comes true.

For example, if someone believes they are a great communicator, they are more likely to deliver a keynote in a clear, calm, and confident manner, resulting in a well-received speech.

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The self-fulfilling prophecy is also self-perpetuating – in our example, when the speech is well-received, it confirms and strengthens that person’s original belief, increasing their performance even further on subsequent, similar occasions.

But how powerful is belief? Is it the original belief that produces the results, or simply that the belief results from facts, and those facts produce the results?



Here is just one example of the effect of belief. At a sports event in California, several people reported having food poisoning. The examining doctor deduced that the source was a machine at the venue. To warn others, this was announced over the public-address system.

People began to faint and vomit. Even those who did not consume from the machine, but were near it, complained of the same symptoms. Shortly afterwards, it was confirmed and announced that the machine was not the source of the illness – those who had used the machine miraculously suddenly recovered.

When beliefs can produce such physical responses, it is no surprise that they can also profoundly alter our behaviour. So, how best to harness this phenomenon in the corporate world? The key is to change people’s beliefs about what they are good at – doing so changes their behaviour and consequently their performance.

Everyone has beliefs about themselves, which can be broadly categorised into beliefs about what they are ‘great at’, ‘average at’ and ‘bad at’. The reality is, of course, far more nuanced. However, this broad categorisation is sufficient to make significant progress.

For a ‘quick win’, it is best to avoid tackling the category of ‘bad at’ – these beliefs are hard to shift, and attempts to do so are frequently unsuccessful.

The category of ‘great at’ is one where improvements can be made – but these tend to be incremental. In addition, strengthening this type of belief tends to happen automatically (the self-perpetuating phenomenon).

The category where we can achieve disproportionately large results is that of ‘average at’. So how do we change a person’s beliefs about their ‘average at’ skills and abilities?

The best approach is to take a skill or attribute that the person believes they are ‘average at’, but for which you see they have greater potential. Shifting this type of belief requires three steps.

First, a catalyst, ideally positive feedback from credible others – to use our example again, if a person is told by

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Let’s be clear - this is not about creating false beliefs in people about their abilities. It is about taking genuine instances where someone performed ‘great at’ something that they don’t consider themselves to be more than ‘average at’ in general.

By recognising the specific ‘great at’ episode, you can encourage the person to see that they can be great in general at this skill, give them the courage to demonstrate further instances of this, and ultimately shift their belief in their ability.

By shifting their belief, you initiate the self-fulfilling (and consequent self-perpetuating) phenomenon, which can achieve significant increases in their performance across multiple areas.

In practical terms, this needn’t be a difficult or costly intervention for companies. If you consistently show that you expect good performances, give positive feedback every time someone performs ‘great at’ something outside their usual skill set and frequently give people the opportunity to shine in new areas, you can radically shift the performance and outcomes of all those within your organisation.

### + ABOUT MARY TAYLOR

Mary Taylor has worked with top executives in many globally recognised brands, including Apple, Cartier, Ferrari, Dior, Pfizer, Prada and Sony, and has a unique understanding of the challenges of corporate life at the top.

Mary’s academic and professional background includes working in maximum-security prisons as part of HM Government’s Accelerated Promotion Scheme and as a top corporate lawyer. She is also a qualified psychologist.

their boss that their contribution in a meeting was clearly communicated and well-received, they will internalise that and it will sow the seed.

Second, the person needs to be given further opportunities to demonstrate the same ability – people need to believe that they can repeat the performance, not that it was a lucky one-off. Step one encourages them to try again, where otherwise they may not.

Third, the person needs to receive positive feedback every time they perform well, at least initially. This reinforces their belief that they indeed possess this skill objectively.