

Climbing with Galatea and Pygmalion – The Power of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

“Whether you think you can or you think you can’t - You are right” – Henry Ford

The following text is something I wrote on an Instagram post back in January of 2018 accompanying a video of a simple run and jump boulder.

A year ago, I wouldn't have dreamed of doing a boulder like this. I was afraid of jumps and parkour-style boulders, avoided them wherever I could and when there was no way around it, I usually failed miserably. And my biggest mistake was probably that I kept telling myself that I was horrible at jumping and I couldn't change something about it anyway. Then, last year at the Berlin championship's the last boulder in the finals was a small, easy Run-and-Jump. Basically everybody did it, except for me. I barely moved out of the starting position. This was the turning point for me. After the comp I decided I had to change something, I couldn't just go on like that with such an obvious weakness. So I started practising. At first it was terrible, I must have looked like a complete idiot, trying to jump without actually moving. But after some time it got a little bit better, and as I got better it started to be more fun. And because I had more fun I did it more often. And because I did it more often I got even better...

Today, I wouldn't go as far to call jumping my strength, but it got a lot better and I'm pretty comfortable with them now. And guess what, it is actually a lot of fun. But the most important thing was, that I stopped telling myself, I can't jump and that really goes for everything. As long as you tell yourself you can't do something, you won't be able to do it.

I included a video of the boulder in Berlin last year, but I warn you, it's horrible...

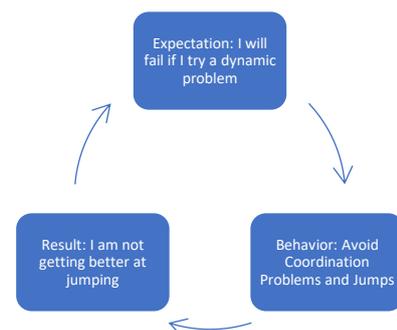
Since then, even more time has passed obviously, and coordination problems and dynos have actually become one of my greatest strengths. Clearly I was not doomed to suck at them forever. So why did I believe I was for such a long time? The answer lies in a phenomenon that is called a self-fulfilling prophecy or an expectancy effect.

Self-Fulfilling & Self-Sustaining Prophecies

Self-fulfilling prophecies are initially false beliefs, which, however, cause a behaviour that does make the expectation become true. The initial conception can both be too positive or too negative, in the end self-fulfilling prophecies simply initiate a trend.

Most of the time, however, none of the parties involved actually realizes how they are shaping their own reality. On the contrary, fulfilment of the prophecy is seen as confirmation of one's competence in judgement, thereby increasing the confidence in future predictions and the strength of the effects following from them. This has the potential to create – depending on the original expectation – a vicious or a virtuous cycle.

For example, in the past, due to my height and inability to do dynamic moves, I always preferred static solutions to boulder problems. This led to me practicing any sort of coordination style movement even less. That lack of training in turn showed in my results and bolstered my self-perception as a bad “Jumper” including the assumption that I should, whenever possible, prefer static solutions. However, once the trend started reversing and I became better and better,



my self-concept shifted, as I was now seeing myself as a good “Jumper”. This in turn led to me preferring dynamic solutions more often, thereby practicing them more and more and becoming even better.

Another incredibly common instance in competitive sports is found in people who are afraid of failure in competitions. The expectation of failure causes stress and distracts from the actual task, thereby actually increasing the probability of a bad performance.

To delineate from the self-fulfilling prophecy is a self-sustaining prophecy. In this case, there is a valid basis for the original assumption. In practices, however, these two are often hard to distinguish. Often times, the original expectation is based on a kernel of truth. Likewise, a self-fulfilling prophecy can become a self-sustaining prophecy, once it has created a certain reality, thereby sustaining it.

Pygmalion & Galatea

Furthermore, two types of self-fulfilling prophecies can be differentiated: If one’s own beliefs are causative of the effect, the phenomenon is called a Galatea effect. If, however, the cause lies in the expectation of another person, e.g., a coach or a parent, this is referred to as a Pygmalion effect.

A Pygmalion effect can occur, if the belief in an athlete’s talent leads to him or her being supported and encouraged a lot. On the other hand, if athletes that are not seen as having potential might not be supported to the same extent or will not be nominated for key competitions. Galatea and Pygmalion effects can be hard to distinguish as well. They may also be in operation at the same time or a Pygmalion effect might be mediated by the transfer of said expectations on to the target.

Using expectancy effects

It is possible to actively use the power of expectancy effects, as they can exert a motivational pull: High expectancies lead to more motivation and training, which lead to higher abilities and better performance which in turn increase expectations again. However, in order to do so, it is necessary to intentionally construct and design the underlying narratives and expectations.

The first step in using expectancy effects deliberately is always to become aware of their possible effects and mechanisms. This enables one to identify existing assumptions, which might be having unwanted effects and change the corresponding beliefs and narratives so that they become beneficial. How exactly this is done will always be specific to the situation and the goal, however the following strategies can serve as guidelines.

1. Self-concept: One’s self-concept answers the question: “Who am I?”. As long as the answer to that contains certain abilities, behaviours and also weaknesses as an integral part of the own person, it is very difficult to escape the vicious cycle of a self-fulfilling prophecy. To utilize expectancy effects, the self-concept has to be re-designed accordingly: Unhelpful self-constructs have to be changed or eliminated and beneficial conceptions of the own person have to be developed. This will take a lot of time and effort, but it is the foundation, as expectations are a direct consequence of one’s self-concept. As long as they remain unchanged, everything else is merely tinkering about with the symptoms, as the existing beliefs will continue to pull the behaviour towards them like a magnet.
2. High goals: Even if one – be it as an athlete or as a coach – is sceptical whether high goals are appropriate, one should set them. High (and preferably specific) goals have shown to be conducive to higher performance in psychological research time and time again, as they raise the standard and demand more until satisfaction can set in. Negative expectancy effects can work the other way around. The person sets only very minor goals or none at all.

As a consequence, they do not demand much from themselves, don't improve and et voilà, the prophecy is fulfilled.

3. Process goals: High goals can easily be perceived as unrealistic. Similarly, it is very difficult to escape the vicious circle of a self-fulfilling prophecy once certain habits and behaviour have become ingrained and weaknesses have developed, since the expectation, is, at least somewhat, true. In this case the solution is not to sugarcoat things or deny the existing problems. On the contrary, that would be counterproductive. I didn't start the process of learning how to do dynamic movements by persuading myself I was good at them either. Instead, goals should be oriented on the learning process and aim at showing a way out of the downward spiral. For instance, I could have set the goal of doing a certain number of jumps and coordination style boulders every week.
4. Intermediate goals: Furthermore, it is helpful to divide the overall goal into smaller subgoals. Again, I didn't start by trying triple dynos. I started by practicing the easiest jumps imaginable. And once I improved, I started double dynos. And once I had mastered those, THEN I started working on triple dynos. Starting off with the end goal is more likely to cause frustration than anything else, since the discrepancies between the current situation and the target state can seem insurmountable. If, however, the process is divided into many smaller segments, each intermediate goal is doable and the overall goal will become less intimidating.
5. Effort-Performance-Contingency: An implicit assumption, which is usually part of a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially if it is a negative one, is that one is simply unable to improve in certain things, regardless of all the training and effort. This again keeps one from actually training, because why invest all of that time and effort, if it won't lead anywhere. More often than not however, this assumption is untrue and is actually quickly recognized as such if it is actually stated openly. To counteract this, it is important to remind oneself again and again, that performance and improvements are, to a very large part, dependent on the investment one makes. At the bottom of it, it is about substituting the belief: "I'm not good at XYZ because I am simply not made for that" with "I am not (yet) good at XYZ, because I haven't invested the necessary time and effort." That does not mean anyone can achieve anything or that effort is the only determinant of performance. There will always be people who are naturally gifted in certain things, while others have a really hard time with it. However, one will almost always be better off when making the necessary investments in terms of time and energy.
6. Self-handicapping: Self-handicapping is a central mechanism by which negative expectancy effects can operate. Self-handicapping is defined as behaviour that undermines one's performance and capabilities in order to be able to excuse a possible failure in advance. Examples include the avoidance of training, downplaying one's abilities or even the consumption of alcohol and drugs, especially right before a competition. Although these behaviours can serve as justification for a bad performance, they objectively increase the risk of that very same thing happening in the first place and therefore should be stopped. This can be very difficult, since often times these mechanisms operate subconsciously and have become very ingrained, but in order to fulfil one's true potential it is absolutely necessary to eliminate these behaviours.
7. Selective Training: The avoidance of training can – as described – be used as a self-handicapping strategy. However, a lot of times, athletes will simply spend more time and energy training those aspects and abilities they are already good at, because that is – usually – also the most enjoyable part of training. On the other hand, comparatively little time is

spent practicing the things that would actually require it the most, since almost nobody likes working on their weaknesses, especially in front of other people.

However, with all these mechanisms and their situational differences, it should never be forgotten that in the end, the important consequences are in the behaviour. Therefore, it is of central importance to identify the exact points on which expectations influence actual behaviour, in order to understand how these effects are operating and to counteract them if necessary. For example, I might realize that my expectations keep me from practicing a certain style of boulder problems because I am afraid to embarrass myself. In this case I will (hopefully) do something about it, maybe by blocking out certain times of my training, during which the gym is relatively empty, just to focus on that. At the same time, it is obviously necessary to start working on those underlying beliefs and assumptions but waiting until they have changed to start modifying the training is not a great strategy. Instead, both should occur at the same time, in keeping with the motto: "Fake it till you make it". This can also initiate an upward spiral, as performance improvements due to the training will make it easier to modify beliefs and changes in beliefs and therefore expectations will make it easier to improve.

Similarly, the transfer of expectations from one person to the another is also just possible via behaviour, be it verbal or non-verbal, extremely obvious or incredibly subtle. For example, a coach can openly tell an athlete, that he does not think the athlete will ever get anywhere. But he could also express his expectations by setting low goals, not paying much attention during training sessions or not reacting surprised after setbacks or subpar performances. In these cases, the responsibility for identification and intervention is on both the coach and the athlete, in extreme cases that might even mean switching coaches. The same obviously applies for parents and other important persons (although finding new parents is obviously not an option).

However, regardless of the source and the type, expectancy effects can be incredibly powerful. If left unchecked they are able to create a crippling vicious cycle. On the other hand, if they are used intentionally they can create an equally impressive upward spiral and it is up to each and every one of us whether we will use them to bring out the best in themselves and everyone around us.