

# Pygmalion Effect



## Coaching – the Pygmalion effect and self-fulfilling prophecies

In Greek mythology, Pygmalion was a sculptor, who fell in love with his sculpture of a woman. The “Pygmalion effect” says that our expectations of others influences how we interact with them and, in turn, influences their subsequent performance – good and bad. The Pygmalion effect is often at play in coaching!

Central to the Pygmalion effect is the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, the expectations and perceptions that coaches form about their athletes serve as prophecies that ultimately determine the athlete’s level of athletic achievement. This expectation-performance process has four steps:

1. Coach develops expectations for each athlete
2. The coach’s expectations influence his/her treatment of individual athletes
3. The way that the coach treats individual athletes affects the athlete’s performance and rate of learning
4. The athlete’s behaviour and performance conform to the coach’s expectations

### Step 1 - Coach develops expectations for each athlete

Coaches make judgements about their athletes and form their expectations generally using three types of information:

- Person cues (e.g., gender, body size, racial or ethnic group),
- Performance information (e.g., physical test results, past performances, others coaches’ comments), and
- Psychological characteristics (e.g., estimations of coachability, self-discipline, maturity).

Coaches vary in terms of the sources and weightings they use and while some of these expectations are processed cognitively, others are quite subconscious.

### Step 2 - Coach’s expectations influence treatment of athletes

While it doesn’t always happen automatically, the expectations formed by coaches have the potential to affect their behaviour.

Pygmalion-type coaches behave differently regarding high and low expectancy athletes. This is generally in relation to the frequency and quality of interactions, quantity and quality of instruction, as well as the frequency and type of performance feedback given.

### **Step 3 - Coach treatment affects athlete performance and rate of learning**

The coach's behaviours in the previous step then maximise the development of high-expectancy athletes while limiting the achievements of low-expectancy ones.

Low expectancy players who are consistently given less effective and intensive instruction, and minimal active time in practice drills will not show the same degree of improvement as their high-expectancy team mates who are given optimal learning opportunities.

So, the coach's original expectation *determined* rather than *predicted* the level of achievement.

It is not just physical achievement that this effect relates to – it can also affect psychological growth (self-concept, perceived competence, intrinsic motivation, level of competitive trait anxiety) over a season.

### **Step 4 - The athlete's behaviour and performance conform to the coach's expectations**

This behavioural conformity is an important step because it reinforces to the coach that their initial judgements were accurate – they think they are astute judges of potential! This can then intensify the coach's Pygmalion tendencies.

#### **Possible actions**

There are a number of checks that you can do to make sure you're not falling prey to your own expectations and judgements of potential! For example:

- consider the sources you use to form early expectations of athletes
- realise that early assessments of potential may be inaccurate and may need to change
- design activities that provide all athletes with opportunities to develop skills
- use skill improvement to evaluate and reinforce individual athletes
- interact frequently with everyone
- respond to skill errors with corrective instruction, and
- be aware of the time each athlete spends in non-skill activities.

#### **Final thoughts**

It should be acknowledged that not all coaches are Pygmalion-prone and not all athletes allow their coach's behaviour or expectations to affect their performances or development. This variation suggests that those who are aware of and understand the self-fulfilling prophecy can avoid some of the negative effects.