

Pygmalion Tendencies

In Roman mythology, Pygmalion was a king of Cyprus and a sculptor. He hated women and resolved never to marry. He worked, for many months on a statue of a beautiful woman and he eventually fell madly in love with it.

Modern day equivalents of Pygmalion would include the film 'Pretty Woman' where a rich man tries to make a prostitute become a lady and Raymond Briggs' 'The Snowman' where a boy makes his creation of a snowman come to life.

Heartbroken, because the statue remained lifeless and could not respond to his caresses, Pygmalion prayed to Venus (Aphrodite), goddess of love, to send him a maiden like his statue. The goddess answered his prayer by endowing the statue with life. The maiden, whom Pygmalion called Galatea, returned his love and bore him a son, Paphos.

Pygmalion is also of course the title of the play by George Bernard Shaw. And Shaw's play was the basis for the musical 'My Fair Lady'. The central theme of this story is that one person, Professor Higgins, by his effort and will, attempts to transform another, the flower girl, Eliza Doolittle.

In the world of management, we often attempt to play at being Pygmalion. We select individuals, whom we believe to have talent and potential and we try to make them into something, which they are not (or at least, not yet)! In the name of management development, we (as senior managers and/or trainers) attempt to transform our charges into effective managers and leaders of the future. Success rates seem to vary tremendously. Maybe Shaw can help us, after all it is he who says... 'He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.'

In Shaw's Pygmalion, Eliza Doolittle explains one of the core problems to Colonel Pickering: 'You see, really and truly, apart from the things that anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves but how she is treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me like a flower girl and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady and always will.'

Some managers in organisations always treat their team members in a way that will lead to superior performance. Unfortunately, many managers follow Professor Higgins' example and treat their team members as subordinates, in a way that leads to poor performance.

If we want excellent performance from our managers, then we must treat them as excellent performers.

The key point in this argument is that the responsibility for excellent performance lies squarely on the shoulders of the managers to nurture, develop and believe in their people.

Managers are grown – they are neither born nor made. The role of their seniors is to provide the conditions for that growth. The work environment in which the ‘trainee’ works will be the most important variable to affect the development process.

A secondary point in this argument is that unless the work environment is conducive to growth then none of the things that we (as management developers) do, will have a long-term lasting impact. My definition of the work environment includes the surroundings, culture, reward system, support and so forth.

New managers cannot be manufactured – the mere idea suggests that we can create good managers in the training room. Please, let us have some sense of reality applied to this serious issue!

Predictable though it sounds, probably the two most effective activities of management development are: planned experience and performance management.

Firstly, planned experience. It is by learning through experience (also known as experimental learning) that the best and most effective learning takes place. Experimental learning focuses on giving people understanding rather than simply knowledge. By learning from our experience, we benefit from being involved in the learning process rather than being taught the really powerful learning comes when we are an involved partner in the process.

Another person who believed in the virtues of experimental learning was Churchill who said: ‘I love to learn; I hate to be taught.’

I think that we are basically curious. Unfortunately schooling and the educational system seems to succeed in knocking that pure curiosity out of too many of us.

The second of the most effective activities of management development is performance management. It is a way of obtaining better results by understanding and managing performance. This is done within an agreed framework of planned goals, objectives and standards of achievement and competences. Finally, the glue that binds experimental learning and performance management, is coaching. I’m sure you remember this quote from the Master of Creative thinking of Albert Einstein: ‘I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide conditions in which they can learn.’