

Our Conditioned Sub-Conscious Mind

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Conditioning is an important component of learning. It can impact the way we see ourselves and others, and it affects the way we behave towards others. By understanding how individuals are conditioned, Managers will learn how they can be a positive influence on organizational behaviour.

When two events occur simultaneously, animals will learn to associate them. For example, horses respond to their owner entering the field with a bucket, but ignore other people. They associate the owner and the bucket with food. In his now famous experiments on conditioning, Russian physiologist, Ivan Pavlov, demonstrated this "conditioned reflex" with dogs. Pavlov rang a bell at the same time he fed dogs. The dogs began to connect the stimulus of bell ringing with food and, after a short time, the animals would salivate at the sound of the bell, whether food appeared or not. We now call this type of learning classical conditioning and the response it produces a conditioned reflex. It is known as the Pavlovian effect and is found in all complex animals, including humans.

This concept has been addressed by many

Sociologists in a variety of studies. One of the more interesting analyses uses a perspective called the Pygmalion Effect, which is another insightful concept from Greek Mythology.

The myth is widely known and often used as an example of how we can wish something to be true with such a passion, it will eventually become true. Ovid described the Pygmalion's statue as "Her face was life itself". Pygmalion brought his stone figure gifts of birds and



jewelry, and eventually prayers of life. As the story goes, those prayers were answered and the two eventually married.

"The Pygmalion Effect, also known as the self-fulfilling prophecy, suggests that if a person is given a label by someone of higher status, that label might eventually stick. This could be a parent, teacher, the police, or a manager. Once an individual is labeled, others view that

person in terms of the label. Others don't even try to determine whether the label accurately identifies the person's attributes. It is just accepted and the individual is treated accordingly.

In George Bernard Shaw's classic tale of Pygmalion, (also known as "My Fair Lady"), a sophisticated professor of phonetics bets his friend he can take a common flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, and transform her into a lady. The theory behind the Pygmalion Effect is that people will act in accordance to the way they are treated.

An outcome of being labeled is that an individual may actually come to see themselves as fitting that label, as Eliza Doolittle did. From a negative perspective, think of a child who is constantly told by parents or teachers that he or she is "dumb", "stupid" or "lazy", soon the child will respond with those behaviours. On the other hand, if a child is constantly told they are a "hard worker", "bright" or "wonderful", he or she will live up to those expectations. The child forms a self-concept based on conditioning through these labels. The child comes to see him or herself as dumb or smart

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and lives up to those perceptions.

This conditioned reflex behaviour has been extensively documented in the research done by Jane Elliott and her work entitled "The Angry Eye". In these sociological experiments, teachers were told that blue-eyed pupils were smarter than brown-eyed pupils. Teachers and other students then began to subconsciously favour the blue eyed children resulting in them achieving higher marks and a more positive self-concept.

I am often engaged by a company when there is a situation of socially unacceptable corporate behaviour. The behaviour is usually a viola-

tion of a cultural standard or unwritten code. It might be something that is simply seen as not-normal, or non-conforming, organizational behavior. The Pygmalion theory cannot explain what may have caused the person to behave that way in the first place, but does help explain why people appear motivated to continue.

Once a person is labeled as a trouble-maker, several things will happen. For one, the individual might respond by engaging in even more inappropriate acts because he or she feels that's the behavior others expect. Secondly, the labeled person can find themselves stigmatized. This means that no matter what great strengths they might have, they

are always seen first in terms of the label.

A result of this corporate conditioning is that many managers believe they being are open minded when instead they are just rearranging their pre-conditioned prejudices. A more positive implementation would occur when a leader expects their employees to succeed and manages the environment with that belief in mind. It is likely the team will perform up to the manager's expectation, just as Eliza Doolittle magically became a lady in George Bernhard Shaw's famous play.

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