

# Let's Go For Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Wayne Turk



**W**e have all heard of self-fulfilling prophecies. Usually the term is used negatively. Let's look at it a little more positively when it comes to the people on your project. We will consider the negative too, but only in passing.

People have a tendency to live up—or down—to expectations. If you set high but reachable goals and share your expectations with your employees or project team, they can attain them. The expectations have to be realistic, however. That is what is meant by reachable. If goals are set too high, some people will give up before they ever get started. If goals are too low, people will attain them, but it may not help you accomplish your job as program manager.

## Horse Sense

Let's start with the story of a horse, a very smart horse, by the name of Clever Hans. In the early 20th century, a mathematician taught Hans to do math, spell, solve problems, and do a number of other unlikely tricks. That wasn't so unusual. Other animals had been trained to do similar things. There was one big difference, though: All the other trained

animals had to have their trainer present to perform; Clever Hans didn't. He didn't seem to need cues from his trainer. He would perform and answer questions for anyone.

Of course, as with any trick, there were some problems. If the horse couldn't see the questioner, he didn't know the answer. And if the questioner didn't know the answer, the horse didn't either.

Are you beginning to get suspicious? So were a couple of researchers, Carl Stumpf and Oskar Pfungst (I'm not kidding—those were their names!). After much observation, they determined that the horse was able to answer based on the body language of the questioner. Clever Hans (who really was pretty clever) would start tapping his hoof when the questioner leaned forward and would stop when the questioner straightened up. The horse was good enough that even a raised eyebrow or the dilation of the questioner's nostrils would stop his hoof tapping.

As you can guess, questioners were actually giving the horse correct answers by communicating their expectations

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through visual signals, however small and unintentional. Clever Hans was only clever when and because he was expected to be.

I'm not comparing people to horses, but the same thing works for them. If a PM communicates that she believes in the people working for her, has faith that they can do the job, and treats them with respect, the PM sets up expectations of success. Those communicated expectations now reside in both the manager and the person working for her. For example, the PM may assign the team member a challenging task or give him added responsibilities along with the understanding that she, the PM, expects the person to succeed. In most cases, the worker will do whatever it takes to do the job well or complete the task. Just knowing that a manager believes in him will make the person do the kind of good work expected.

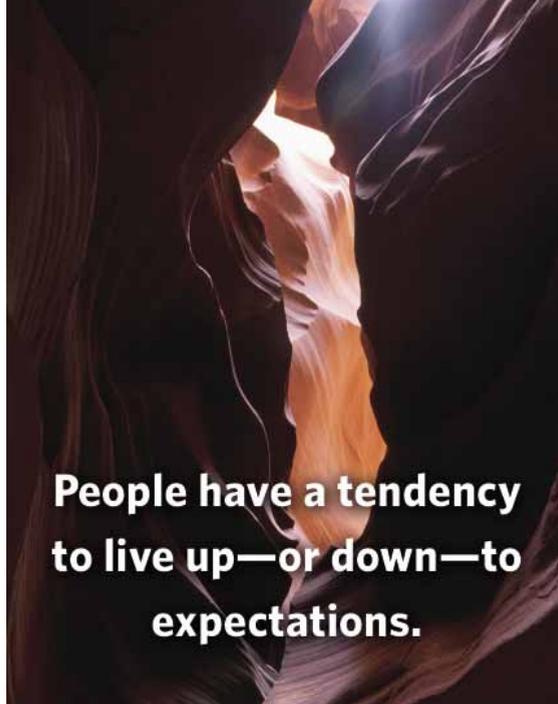
On the negative side (and here's where we normally hear the term "self-fulfilling prophecy"), if a PM or manager creates a situation where the expectations are negative (i.e., the employee will fail), that will usually happen, too. We have all seen instances when the boss gives a task to someone in whose capability to do the job he doesn't really have faith—and sure enough, it doesn't get done or is done poorly. That happens in many cases because the manager communicates the negative expectations through language (verbal or body) and attitude. Don't set people up to fail. Set them up to succeed!

### **Welding the Message in Place**

Forensic psychologist and examiner Dr. Madeline Daniels, in an article entitled "The Self Fulfilling Prophecy," <[www.drmadelinedaniels.com/?p=26](http://www.drmadelinedaniels.com/?p=26)>, that examines the power of expectation, gives the following example of a study done by Dr. Albert King on welder trainees.

A group of welder trainees who had all scored approximately equal in aptitude began training. Everyone, including the trainer, was told that five of the men had scored higher on the aptitude test. All five finished at the top of the class with a great record—fewer absences, less time (by half) to learn skills, and a significantly higher final test score. All students were asked whom they would want to work with, and all selected one of the five men they believed to have the higher aptitude.

It appears that the trainer and the other students set higher expectations for the "special" five, and the five lived up to those expectations. It seems that the trainers and other train-



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ees created truth out of fiction by unconsciously providing support and high expectations. With all that subliminal encouragement, it's easy to understand why those five trainees developed a positive attitude towards themselves and their work.

The study provides some pretty amazing confirmation that the self-fulfilling prophecy can work. Daniels goes on to give ways in which these expectations are transmitted and encouraged to become reality. To paraphrase her findings:

- **Climate:** Your non-verbal signals encourage or discourage those who work for you. You know how much a smile or a friendly tone of voice affects you.
- **Feedback:** Positive feedback encourages; negative comments discourage. Even when someone makes a mistake, there are different ways to respond. Comments like "Not again! You'd better learn to do it right," can do damage to attitude and confidence. "Not bad, but it might be better to try it this way instead," is helpful and encouraging, building more confidence.
- **Amount of input:** With positive expectations, most people tend to give that person more information to help them along. With negative expectations, people tend not to bother to give information.
- **Amount of output:** We expect more and better work from a good worker than a poor one. If you say something that, however diplomatically worded, translates to, "Don't bother with that; I know you can't do it," you discourage the employee from taking on any new responsibilities. Yes there are exceptions—the person who wants to prove you wrong—but they are relatively few.

### **Goals for Employees and for Yourself**

So how do you actually set goals and expectations for your employees? Simply telling them what you expect is one way. But there is a better way. It takes more time and effort, but can pay great dividends in the end.

Sit down with your people individually. Together, map out what the goals are for the year, the quarter, the length of the project, the next major milestone, or whatever period is appropriate. Ensure that the goals are attainable and realistic, but don't set them too low. Sounds a little like the old Management by Objectives methodology, doesn't it? Write down those goals. Keep a copy and give the person a copy. Then meet periodically with each team member to assess progress toward meeting the goals. If things aren't progressing well, the two of you may have to change the goals. Make

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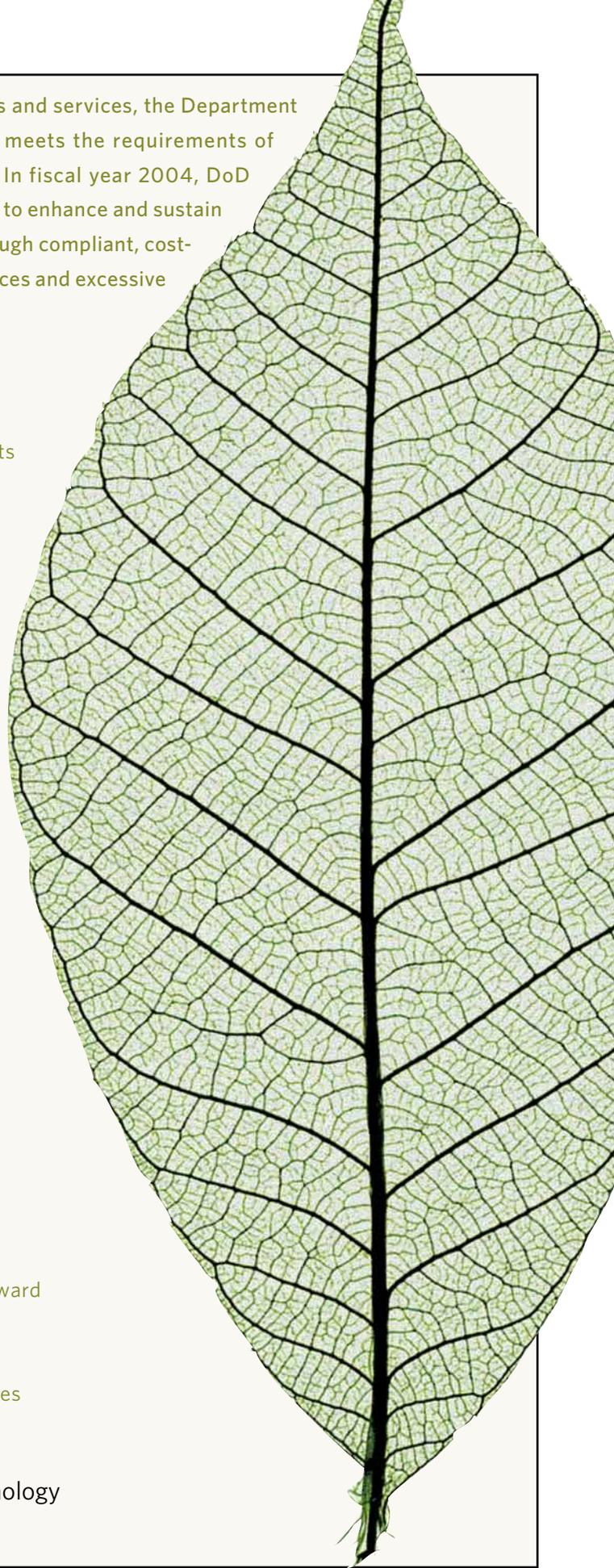
# Green Procurement



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- ☞ Increase purchases of green products and services consistent with the demands of mission efficiency and cost-effectiveness, with continual progress toward federally established procurement goals
- ☞ Reduce the amount of solid waste generated
- ☞ Reduce consumption of energy and natural resources
- ☞ Expand markets for green products and services

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that the last course of action, and use it only if unforeseen obstacles have arisen. Provide encouragement and help, if needed, but try to maintain the original goals.

Sometimes posting the goals publicly in the workspace helps. This is best done with simple numerical goals. It provides an everyday reminder and provides an opportunity for team members to provide encouragement and support for each other. You have to be very careful in making goals public, though, as posting them could create problems by showing unevenness in assignment of goals and highlighting failure, if that happens. There are other possible ramifications. It all depends on you, your people, the environment, the project, and the goals.

If you want to try this with the whole project team and team goals, the same process works. Have the team set goals as a group. In this case, posting the goals is always a very good idea. It lets everyone know what is expected and how the team is progressing. If the goals are quantitative, showing progress is a great way to keep up enthusiasm and motivation. When things aren't going well, stronger members of the team will sometimes step up and help weaker members. Encourage that. Remind everyone it's a team effort, not an individual competition.

You should also be setting up your own goals—individual and project team—with your boss. Team goals require success from the people you manage. It helps to share your project team goals with your team to let them know you believe in them and their ability to meet the goals. That is part of good team communication. Without the project team's support, you and the project are almost guaranteed to fail.

You should also establish personal goals, which may be significantly different from the goals set with your boss. For example, one goal might be to get a team member promoted. Another might be to try to balance your personal and professional life better by not working weekends so that you can spend time with your family. Another might be to communicate better.

### The Power of Paper (or PDA)

Obvious maybe, but it really helps to keep a couple of lists in a notebook or on your PDA. The first is a to-do list. You'll be adding to it daily, and a goal is to check off at least one thing daily too (so make sure that larger goals are broken up into subgoals—"knock \$500,000 off spending over the next

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two years to make the budget" might be daunting, but a but subgoals of "cut four hours of overtime" and "get one budget-cutting suggestion from the team" might be doable. The second list is for accomplishments, large and small. That list serves two purposes. First, it helps your own self-esteem to see what you have actually accomplished over time. Second, when evaluation time rolls around, you have documentation to prove your worth.

As an aside, I suggest that you also keep an accomplishments list for your people. They may not do it themselves, and when it comes to evaluation time, they may not be able to give you concrete examples of their successes. I had one supervisor who kept a 3 x 5 card for each of his employees (this goes back to the dark ages, before desktop computers). Whenever he saw or heard something good about a person's work, he noted it. Then at evaluation time, he was able to remind the person of accomplishments, many of which he or she had forgotten. My guess is that he noted bad things there too, but that is another story.

The bottom line is to expect great things from your people and let them know your expectations. Set goals with them and monitor progress. Let the expectations be a positive self-fulfilling prophecy, and enjoy the successes of your people because they reflect well on you as well as on them.

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