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# The McPygmalion Effect

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*Many entry-level workers in the fast-food industry don't cut the mustard. Managers' low expectations are part of the problem. Here is a simple, inexpensive training plan that may help.*

**S**ince 1980, the number of entry-level workers has dropped by 4.5 million. Eighty-six percent of new jobs generated between 1985 and 1995 will be in the service sector. Those figures add up to a bleak picture of trouble and turnover at the lower levels of service-oriented businesses.

Who hasn't seen the "now hiring" signs in the windows of convenience stores, fast-food restaurants, dry cleaners, and gas stations? Who hasn't heard the labor-shortage horror stories that employers have to tell?

A program created in Philadelphia to bring together welfare recipients and the fast-food industry led to a discovery about turnover and the labor shortage: Service-oriented businesses would have a plentiful labor supply if they would invest modestly in training their newly hired employees to succeed.

**By Barbara Whitaker Shimko**

## Reversing Pygmalion

Negative perceptions and expectations of the workforce are partly to

Information on the power of supervisory expectations has been included in hundreds of management-development seminars. But knowing such information is not the same as using it during a busy workday.

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blame for the service economy's turnover problem. The Pygmalion effect—the powerful influence of one person's expectations on another's behavior—has been widely understood (if not practiced) by managers for decades. What managers expect of their employees and the way they treat them may determine the workers' performance and career progress.

Adding new training burdens to already harried service-sector managers may be unreasonable. A better solution is to target newly hired employees for training in raising their managers' expectations of them. Placing the focus on the new employees, rather than the managers—can dramatically reduce turnover while improving productivity.

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## A case in point

Project Transition, the Philadelphia program, developed out of the work of a consultant who was looking into the turnover problem in a top fast-food chain. Welfare recipients seemed to be a natural source of employees for the labor-starved fast-food industry, the fastest growing segment of the service sector.

Project Transition was created to screen, train, and place welfare recipients in full-time jobs at cooperating restaurants. The program pairs each new employee with a volunteer "job coach" who helps in the transition from welfare to employment.

The coaches provide new employees with valuable information about job expectations. None of the 57 participants in the first year of Project Transition went back on welfare; they couldn't have succeeded without the intervention of the coaches.

Some interventions were simple: "You need to smile, not frown. The manager thinks you have a bad attitude when you frown." But all of the interventions were critical, and helped the workers to remain employed and off welfare.

Given the labor shortage and the fact that the Project Transition participants had training and one-on-one job coaches, why was it necessary for the coaches to rescue their charges from being fired?

An answer to that question emerged because of an unplanned and unexpected role played by the job coaches. The coaches were informal advisors who had no authority over the new workers, so they could be present in the workplace when it was "business as usual." As a result, coaches gained a great deal of anecdotal information about what it's like to be a new worker in a fast-food restaurant.

The coaches perceived a sink-or-swim atmosphere in the workplaces they observed. Managers provided a lot of technical information on such topics as how to run a cash register and how to use a soft-drink machine. They were not as free with information on other expected work behaviors. Maybe the managers did not know what information was called for or how to convey it. Some evidence suggests that they didn't think its conveyance was appropriate. The bottom line was that new employees who

weren't somehow aware of the behavioral requirements of their jobs consistently fell into patterns that led them to fail.

## Fitting an image

There may not be a shortage of labor, but there is apparently a shortage of workers who fit the image that hiring managers have in mind. The workforce of the 1990s has been widely described in the media. Everyone seems to be aware by now that women, minorities, and such non-mainstream groups as the disadvantaged and the handicapped are making up an increasingly larger segment of the workforce. But even when they understand the demographics, many people do not know how to respond to them.

Turnover seems to be mainly of two types.

■ First there are the workers who fit the hiring managers' images of appropriate employees. These workers can choose among available jobs in such a high-employment economy, and are likely to leave to take jobs they find more attractive.

■ The second kind of turnover involves the "new breed" of non-mainstream workers. These people do not fit the managers' images of appropriate employees. They end up leaving or getting fired because they have become discouraged about job conditions, including short hours, split shifts, repeated assignment to "dirty" tasks, and other results of being perceived in a bad light by managers.

The non-mainstream workers make up the group that is becoming the major part of the workforce in fast-food restaurants and other service outlets.

## Studying the factors

Researchers interviewed 38 general managers of fast-food restaurants. The purpose of the study was to gain further information about service-sector turnover and to document the observations of the Project Transition job coaches. The restaurants were chosen on a random basis, with urban, suburban, and exurban restaurants included. Neither the interviewers nor the general managers had any involvement with Project Transition.

The 38 managers cited the factors they use in making personnel decisions regarding hiring, promoting,

## Categories of trainability mentioned by managers

Pygmalion factors	Percent of total factors
Gut reaction	2
Work ethic	15
Initiative	6
Work quality	5
Reliability	12
Availability	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Modest training needed</b>	
Appearance	7
Attitude	14
Eye contact	2
Job knowledge	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Substantial training needed</b>	
People skills	5
Management skills	4
English	3
Honesty	4
Maturity	3
Personality	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Training won't affect</b>	
Age	0
Intelligence	1
The "live body" factor	1
Prior experience	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6</b>

and firing employees. The factors: work ethic, attitude, reliability, availability, appearance, initiative, people skills, work quality, job knowledge, experience, management skills, honesty, maturity, English-language skills, eye contact, personality, gut reaction, the "live body" factor, intelligence, and age.

The figure lists them and shows what percentage each factor made up of all the factors mentioned.

## The four categories of trainability

Using common sense in addition to the experiences reported in the project, the determining factors have been divided into four categories:

- factors that training won't affect;
- factors that can be learned with substantial training;
- factors that can be learned with modest training;
- "Pygmalion factors," which are easily learned.

**Factors that training won't affect** may be the most clear-cut. Such factors include age, intelligence, "live body," and experience.

Age can't be modified by training. The general managers who said they use the age factor referred to applicants whom they considered too old to hire. Experience also can't be changed by training. The managers said they sometimes hire an applicant simply because he or she is a "live body." A body's aliveness is generally accepted as not amenable to training; the same is true for intelligence.

**Factors requiring substantial training** include English skills, management skills, and people skills. All occupy many pages in course catalogs and represent untold hours of training time in business and academic settings.

Other characteristics were placed in this category because they are so complicated as to require extensive training along various lines. They include honesty (managers cited employees who would lie, steal, or hide things in the trash), personality (managers referred to employees as shy or not having good personalities), and maturity (managers spoke of employees who were irresponsible and lacking in common sense).

**Factors requiring modest training** include appearance, attitude, eye contact, and job knowledge. These factors have been grouped together largely because of experiences in Project Transition. During training sessions to prepare potential workers for successful job interviews, it was apparent that participants improved markedly in some areas with very little training.

Appearance was the easiest. After a few minutes of comments on what makes a positive impression—pointing out a few staff members or participants who looked appropriate—everyone in the class would come in the next day looking terrific. What's more, the participants maintained the more positive appearances after the instruction.

Attitude was another factor that was learned quickly by Project Transition participants. Instruction focused on the importance of a positive attitude and the behaviors that project a positive attitude—such as being enthusiastic, asking appropriate questions, and acting courteously.

Participants believed the information would help them; after all, it was a reasonable explanation for some of their own failures. They were intrigued by the idea that they themselves could have a dramatic effect on the outcomes of their interactions with management. They were particularly interested when they found that it wasn't all that difficult for them to learn the needed skills.

Positive eye contact was another

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easily gained trait. Many of the participants had received contrary instructions as children, but they easily learned to apply the axiom, "Give a firm handshake and look the person straight in the eye."

Welfare recipients are a hardcore unemployable population. If they can quickly learn positive appearance, eye contact, and attitude behaviors—and they did—it seems likely that such factors are amenable to training.

Job knowledge is clearly a different kind of factor from the others in the "requires moderate training" category; it deals with technical information. Every worker seems able to learn at least some tasks easily. On the first shift of work at a fast-food chain, new employees are able to perform assigned tasks, sometimes simply by watching a co-worker. Project Transition coaches reported that workers taught other workers various parts of the job and sought easily mastered new assignments when their work became too repetitious. Tolerance of high turnover rates is also a clear indication that employees can quickly learn job-related tasks.

It would be misleading to suggest that the total job knowledge needed to function as a successful first-level manager requires only modest training; the sheer volume of information is impressive. What is being suggested is that only modest training is needed to learn the tasks involved in handling one work station, such as making salad, cleaning the dining room, or preparing ice cream.

**Pygmalion factors** include gut reaction, work ethic, initiative, work quality, reliability, and availability. They are characterized by subjectivity and vagueness.

Remarkably, general managers' comments about work quality ("poor job performance," "poor work habits"), initiative ("doesn't show drive," "doesn't seem interested in moving up"), and work ethic ("not enthusiastic," "doesn't have pride") bring to mind another determining factor, gut reaction. In other words, three factors—work quality, initiative, and work ethic—seem to rely solely on the general manager's predisposition to the worker being described.

Availability and reliability are in the "Pygmalion" category because both appear to rise and fall as a direct function of the general manager's expectations of a given worker. That follows the logic that a manager's positive expectations can trigger an upward spiral of job performance.

Project Transition experiences coincided closely with the upward spiral effect. Workers whose managers perceived them positively from the beginning had much more positive attitudes themselves. They liked their jobs more and trusted their managers more.

If conflicts arose with the work schedule, these "good" workers responded to the positive expectations of their managers by telling the truth about when they could get to work and when they couldn't. Managing the work schedule realistically to respond to "good" workers' real conflicts gave managers more reliable employees.

Workers initially perceived negatively by their managers had a correspondingly negative attitude and a lack of trust. The "bad" workers freely

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agreed to all scheduling demands of their managers, and then called in sick just before they were expected at work. Thus were created unreliable employees.

Eighty-five percent of the factors that led general managers to fire employees fall into the categories of "requiring modest training" and "Pygmalion effect." Reliability accounted for 59 percent of all firing decisions.

## **Training to raise expectations**

New employees should be trained, not by outside agencies such as Project Transition, but by internal human resource staff.

The proposed training builds on Pygmalion-inspired work carried out in public schools in the 1970s to improve social acceptance of unpopular students. The students who successfully learned and used the techniques were mentally retarded or disciplinary incorrigibles; that indicates that the techniques can be easily learned and used by adults.

The public-school students spent 90 minutes a week for seven weeks to achieve mastery and success in changing their teachers' expectations and perceptions of them. Early trials in Project Transition suggest a total training time of three to four hours.

The substance of the training would teach the new employee the following:

- to recognize how he or she is perceived by the manager;
- to learn behaviors that will enhance the manager's perceptions, and thus expectations.

A new employee who is accustomed to negative treatment may not even recognize consciously that a manager's behavior evinces negative expectations. Likewise, the manager is undoubtedly unaware of her or his own behavior and its influence.

Project Transition participants reported frequently that managers "don't like me," but couldn't come up with specifics as to how they had reached that conclusion. Role plays and questions about specific interactions on the job made the managers' negative behaviors clear.

Some new behaviors the school children used successfully to shape teacher expectations can also be used with new employees to shape man-

ager expectations. A few have been described above as they were used in Project Transition. Other important behaviors to learn are smiling, making eye contact, and having good posture. A mirror is useful for feedback on smiling, especially if another "look"—such as bored or "cool"—has been the expression of choice for a period of time.

Also good are simple praise comments such as "I like to work in a store where the manager says hello when I come on my shift." When understanding directions the manager is giving, an employee could learn to say, "I understand. I didn't get that before."

Videotape is an essential feedback mechanism for teaching new employees to come across convincingly. Videotape has been used extensively in Project Transition because of its many advantages:

- It makes for briefer training time; trainees can see for themselves what is being explained. No time is wasted trying to convince someone that she slouches when she can clearly see herself slouching on the tape.

- Trainees reported feeling important while being videotaped. "It's like being on television!" is a common reaction.

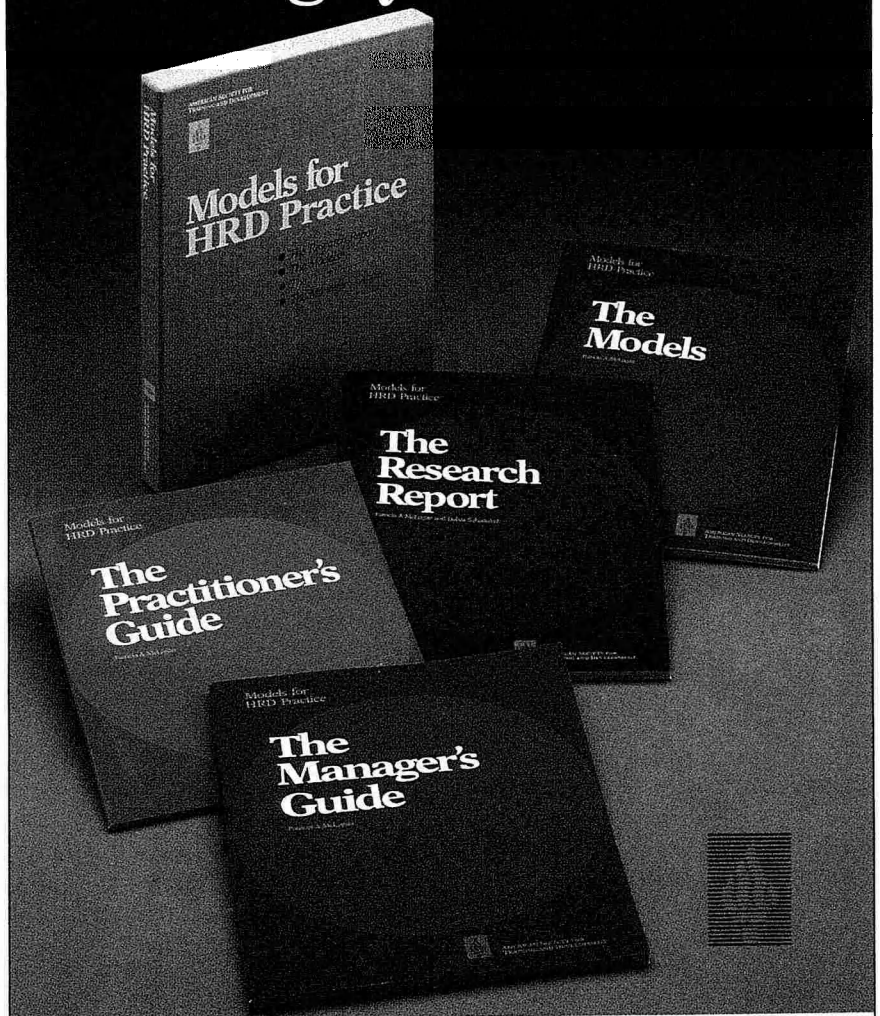
- Studying oneself and others on videotape provides a powerful lesson in self-knowledge, meant to be a tool for a trainee to use for his or her own benefit. In other words, it gives the trainee the responsibility as well as the power for creating his or her own success.

### Solving the career-growth puzzle

Each trainee may have already acquired some of the needed behaviors and may have more difficulty mastering some skills than others. Working in groups of 3 to 25 new employees can be effective. The groups should be arranged according to the convenience of the employer.

Training to raise expectations is very different from the training that currently takes place in the fast-food industry, as described by the 38 general managers. When asked during the interviews what training they were giving their employees, 94 percent of the managers listed job knowledge, while 4 percent cited people skills. Only 2 percent of the managers said they trained employees in attitude skills.

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The emphasis on technical-skills training may not seem surprising, given the high turnover rates in fast-food chains, but the general managers did not report any employee being fired for lack of job knowledge.

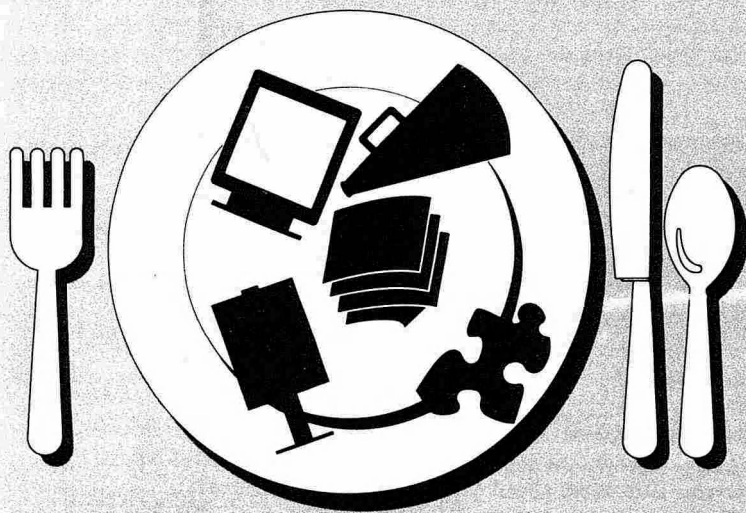
A critical aspect of the new employee taking responsibility for the manager's expectations is that it helps the employee overcome the feelings of impotence that go with any job at the bottom of the totem pole. The employee who has skills with which

to influence the manager toward positive expectations also has some say in her or his career fate.

Feelings of personal control were reported by Project Transition participants to be such a high motivator as to make the trainees tackle learning the new behaviors with zest. They were excited about the possibility that the behaviors could increase their chances of success—and in such a different way than the other methods open to them.

Before the training, participants had seen their roles as those of passive workers at the mercy of their managers' judgment. Getting ahead had been a puzzle they couldn't solve. Of

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### Small Talk for Big Results

Making small talk can be an important behavior for new employees to learn. It is a common skill that puts others (including managers and customers) at ease and can raise managers' perceptions and expectations immensely.

Small-talk skills, previously seen by Project Transition participants as silly, were practiced at lunch and during breaks at the learning sessions. Participants practiced small talk on coaches and fast-food industry representatives who took part in segments of the program, and were amazed at how smoothly time passed when meeting strangers if they used small-talk skills.

The trainees loved the fact that they had the power to influence the quality of meetings. Previously, they would have felt at the mercy of the strangers. Before small-talk training, trainees had been seen as disinterested or rude; in reality, they just didn't have any idea of what to do.

course there were directives about punctuality and working harder, but those paths to success were vague and long-term—not to mention unpredictable.

Behaving in ways that cause their managers to have positive expectations of them can pull new employees into upward spirals of ever-improving performance and success. An employee climbing up the ladder isn't likely to be escorted out the door. That means he or she won't have to be replaced.

When that happens with enough frequency, some of those desperate "now hiring" signs can start to come down. ■