

PYGMALION AT WORK AND PLAY PERFORMANCE - A FUNCTION OF EXPECTATIONS?

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Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion Effect was a classic Theatre Drama of its times (early 20th Century.) Both the Broadway Musical of 1920s 'My Fair Lady' and its movie adaptation in the 1960s were runaway hits. Its theme that 'expectation is the most crucial factor for performance' is a greatly researched and debated topic. The statistical analysis is at best inconclusive either way and hence best left to researchers and analysts.

Without taking sides, I would like to present and draw some parallels to sports events in my own living memory and a professional experience of mine where the theory worked for me clearly. So, here it goes.

VVS Laxman is arguably the most stylish and elegant Indian Batsman of recent times. He quickly followed a fellow Hyderabad stylist Mohammed Azharuddin into the Indian test cricket team and established himself. His record in test cricket as a batsman is very good indeed. But, even more noteworthy was his ability to shepherd the tail-enders and knit together very good partnerships with them in critical and crucial match situations. This way, he actually won at least three test matches in the period 2008-2010 from near hopeless situations. These statistics by themselves do not make the story unique. He followed a somewhat counter intuitive strategy in these partnerships. Instead of cornering the strike by only letting the tail ender (partner) just play one or two balls per over, he chose to treat them like near equal partners and gave them a significant amount of the strike. Of course, he constantly coached, coaxed, and counselled them but never made them feel insecure and worse still incompetent. He clearly believed in their abilities to hold one end up as he went about his task of counterattacking and winning matches. The most famous of these wins was the one against Australia at Mohali in 2010 when he with Ishan Sharma added 81 runs for the last wicket and got India a truly remarkable victory. Ishan in fact scored 31 of these runs and more importantly faced a very high 70% of the number of balls the partnership lasted. Let's contrast this with what Ben Stokes did to win the Headingley test match in 2019 again against Australia - he added 76 runs in just 10 overs out of which his partner Jack Leach scored just 1 run! Stokes clearly believed in his own awesome big hitting capabilities rather than his partner's staying capabilities. Hence, he went hammer and tongs to completely destroy the opposition single handedly. He was, in short, a one-man demolition army at work. Though Stokes's is the more understandable and accepted approach given his big hitting skills and reputation, let us credit Laxman for not only believing in the Pygmalion effect but also walking the talk!!!

Cannot resist a digression though - there are many more such heroics of the 'one-man army' type in one-day (limited overs) cricket where the enforced field restrictions and availability of

a finite number of overs only enables the super stars to shine and obliterate the opposition more frequently.

Of course, my own favorite 'one man army' knocks in One Day Cricket are - the 183 that Kapil Dev scored in 1983 World cup (though he had Madan Lal and Kirmani, both decent batsmen, for company) and Sir Viv Richards for 189 in 1984 against England in Old Trafford when he scored 90 of the 104 runs that he added with Michael Holding for the last wicket, a world record which till date remarkably remains intact. Common to both these heroics is the fact that they were performed while batting first and not while chasing a target.

Pivoting to my own career incident, in the mid 1990's, aided by the Team Narasimha Rao/Man Mohan Singh's reforms and their daring opening-up initiatives there was a boom in the Indian economy driven by the domestic consumption demand. The export market also opened up for India in a significant way, thanks to a sharp weakening of the INR. In fact, 35-40% annual growth for well established businesses was not uncommon. Naturally, the manufacturing sector was under pressure to increase capacity, improve productivity and quality - all at once. Now, my career till then had involved sales and marketing responsibilities mainly. The auto ancillary company, wherein I headed the sales function, was under tremendous pressure to meet the volume, delivery and quality expectations of the customers. Fresh capacity creation was taking its own lead time and the mounting backlog orders caused high friction between the plant and the sales teams. At my wits end, I chose to go and specifically meet the company CEO to give vent to my difficulties and frustration. He heard me pour my heart out patiently without any major display of emotion, and as I was about to leave, at the close of the meeting he said, "Srini, I agree with you that the plant needs a much greater customer orientation. So, I have decided that from tomorrow, you will be the Plant Head. You will have a free hand and have my full support. I am very confident that you will deliver the results that we all need and good luck."

So, here I was with near zero manufacturing experience (but plenty of ideas and concepts) stepping into the hot seat feeling energized and empowered. Of course, at the same time there was great pressure too. From thereon, we did very many unconventional things as a team, details of which I will not get into here. Suffice to say, we just consistently kept measuring ourselves on only one yardstick i.e., Customer Service Index (the hitherto prioritized sales volume and turnover were made subservient) and executing plans to improve it. The great success we achieved in the couple of years I spent doing this job were very instrumental in building up my own self-confidence and accelerating my career growth in a very significant way. This to me was literally 'pygmalion' at work!

I just want to end with a note of caution though. It is important that the theory is NOT carried to its extremes and evaluation of basic competence is overlooked while raising the expectations. After all, as the Tamil proverb goes, 'A small bird like a sparrow simply cannot carry a big palm fruit'.