

Understanding the Nature of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies and Performance Excellence

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Introduction

It is important for coaches and consultants to consider how they can affect and influence their athletes and performers in a variety of ways, including with the understandings of self-fulfilling prophecies (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Schaedig, 2020).

According to Schaedig (2020), a self-fulfilling prophecy is a sociological term used to describe a prediction that causes itself to become true...the process by which a person's expectations about someone can lead that someone in ways in which confirm the expectation. The following explains how self-fulfilling prophecies impact individuals and performance excellence, and defines how negative and positive labels placed on a group or individuals can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies and their Effects on Performance

According to Biswas-Diener (2010), "labels place people into conceptual 'boxes' that restrict creativity or a more multifaceted sense of self" (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 103). By placing people in conceptual "boxes" with the use of labels, they identify with that label and are less likely to stretch themselves beyond that framework. For instance, if a team or group are labeled as losers (e.g., negative label), they are less likely to put the effort forward to try, because they already expect themselves to lose, and as a result, when they fail to put the effort forward to try, they are likely to fail and, in turn, reinforce their label as being losers, ultimately acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Weinberg & Gould, 2015)

Biswas-Diener (2010) highlights the idea that positive labels also have the potential to be counterproductive. For example, numerous studies have revealed that when some children are

labeled as intelligent, even who are accurately labeled as gifted, they underperform; not because the kids are not actually smart, but because they do not always expend the effort. In other word, success on a task will only reinforce how they already view themselves-as intelligent- and failure offers a distinct threat to this sense of identity (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The preceding indicates that labels should be carefully handled by coaches (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

According to Burton & Raedeke (2008), “self-fulfilling prophecies occur when coaches’ expectations prompt athletes to behave or perform in ways that conform to those expectations...The self-fulfilling prophecy process is quite subtle, and the ‘expectation-performance process’ in sport can be described as a series of four key steps: 1) Coaches develop expectations for how athletes should perform. 2) Coaches’ expectations influence their treatment of individual performers (i.e., the frequency, duration, and quality of interactions). 3) Coaches’ behaviors affect athletes’ rate of learning and level or performance. 4) The cycle is completed when the athletes’ behavior or performance conforms to the coaches’ expectations” (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 199). Forming preconceived expectations by or for an athlete, creates a domino effect that makes the athlete conform to those expectations (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010). Self-fulfilling prophecies can positively or negatively affect athletic performance (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010).

For example, if a coach believes that an athlete is not capable of achieving a specific performance level, the coach will lose interest in that player as not to waste their resources on even trying to support the athlete in achieving that specific performance level (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010). When the coach fails to support the athlete, as not to waste their resources, the athlete does not receive the support that could help the athlete reach

that specific performance level, and as a result the athlete does not reach that specific performance level and confirms the coaches' preconceived expectations (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010). On the other hand, if the coach believes that an athlete is capable of achieving a specific performance level, the coach will put an extra emphasis on that athlete's abilities, dedicating the time and resources to achieve the specific performance level because they have a preconceived expectation that the athlete is capable (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010). When the coach puts in the time and resources to support the athlete in achieving the specific performance level, the athlete receives the support and feedback that allow them to reach that performance level, and as a result the athlete reaches that preconceived specific performance level expectation (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Self-fulfilling prophecies have the potential to support or hinder athletic performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). The preconceived expectations that characterize self-fulfilling prophecies create a sequence of events that either positively or negatively impact an athlete in their performance expectations (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). The nature of the expectations dictates the outcome of the athletic performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

References

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