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Internal Communications:

The Management of Expectations

By /par Colonel William J. (Bill) Neumann

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Internal Communications: The Management of Expectations

By /par Colonel William J. (Bill) Neumann

Abstract

Those who write about leadership and its theory list internal communications as amongst the most important activities leaders must perform and skills they must display. Similarly, the ability of senior leaders to clearly communicate the vision and achieve internal buy-in is considered crucial to organizational success. Instead of delving into the “how and why” of internal communications, this article leaves those issues to the experts and explores a very important psychological impact that communications produce in a leader – subordinate context.

When a leader communicates with a subordinate or, indeed, any number of subordinates, the interaction engenders expectations. These expectations have a profound impact on motivation, confidence and, ultimately, performance or behaviour. The thesis of this article is, therefore, that leaders must prudently manage the expectations their internal communications generate. Following a look at communications as a leadership activity that creates expectations, the article talks about the “reality shock” that occurs when outcomes do not meet expectations. It then considers the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of the Pygmalion Effect as well as subordinate expectations of their leaders and the overall organization, or Expectancy Theory. After considering some ethical concerns and the management of expectations, the article concludes with thoughts on applicability to strategic level internal communications.

Internal Communications: The Management of Expectations

“Their communications distinguish leaders who are successful from those who are not.”¹

Introduction

Those who write about leadership and its theory list internal communications as amongst the most important activities leaders must perform and skills they must display.² Similarly, the ability of senior leaders to clearly communicate the vision and achieve internal buy-in is considered crucial to organizational success. The Canadian Forces recognizes these imperatives and is serious about ensuring excellence in this area. As an example, the Chief of Review Services has been directed to conduct an independent, high-level review of internal communications practices and attitudes within the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces. When completed, the review will likely highlight success stories to build upon as well as areas for improvement.

There is also no shortage of readily available advice on how and what to communicate. The literature obviously covers verbal and written communications, but we must not forget sign language, proxemics, kinesics, haptics, oculosics, metacommunication, paralanguage, chronemics and even olfactics (communication through the sense of smell).³ The “what” includes information, direction, vision, values, motivation et cetera. This article, however, will leave the how and what, and even most of the “why”, to the communications experts. Instead it will look at a very important psychological impact that internal communications produce in a leader – subordinate context.

When a leader communicates with a subordinate or, indeed, any number of subordinates, the interaction engenders expectations. These expectations have a profound impact on motivation, confidence and, ultimately, performance or behaviour. Although strategic internal communication is a complex process that is filled with pitfalls, leaders must be pro-active in their communications activities and consider the full impact of their actions. The thesis of this article is, therefore, that leaders must prudently manage the expectations their internal communications generate.

Following a look at communications as a leadership activity that creates or influences expectations, the article will discuss the “reality shock” that can happen when outcomes do not meet expectations. We will then consider the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of the Pygmalion Effect as well as subordinate expectations of their leaders and the overall organization, or Expectancy Theory. After considering some ethical concerns and the management of expectations, the article will conclude with thoughts on applicability to strategic level internal communications.

Expectations

*“When one’s expectations are reduced to zero,
one really appreciates everything one does have.”⁴*
Steven Hawking

Treece and Kleen contend that people communicate to inform (or inquire), to persuade and to entertain.⁵ A by-product of communications, especially in a leader – subordinate interchange, is the generation of expectations. We can define expectations as the anticipation of future outcomes or reality. Communication is therefore very powerful in that it engenders a hope or even a belief in an anticipated outcome. The root of the power, as we will see later in the article, is in the profound effect that expectations have on motivation and, ultimately, on behaviour. We will also see that expectations are a two

way street. While the receiver develops expectations based upon interpretations of the message received, the sender also carries expectations based upon the message sent.

In discussing the service provider - client relationship, Naomi Karten makes some observations that apply well to the leader – subordinate relationship:

“ . . . expectations are wondrous creatures: They grow, they shrink, they change shape, they change direction. They shift constantly and they shift easily. And how satisfied (or dissatisfied) your customers [subordinates or superiors] are is determined by these expectations and your performance in meeting them.”⁶

She goes on to offer a mathematical analogy as follows:

$$\text{Customer Satisfaction} = \frac{\text{Your Performance}}{\text{Customer Expectations}}$$

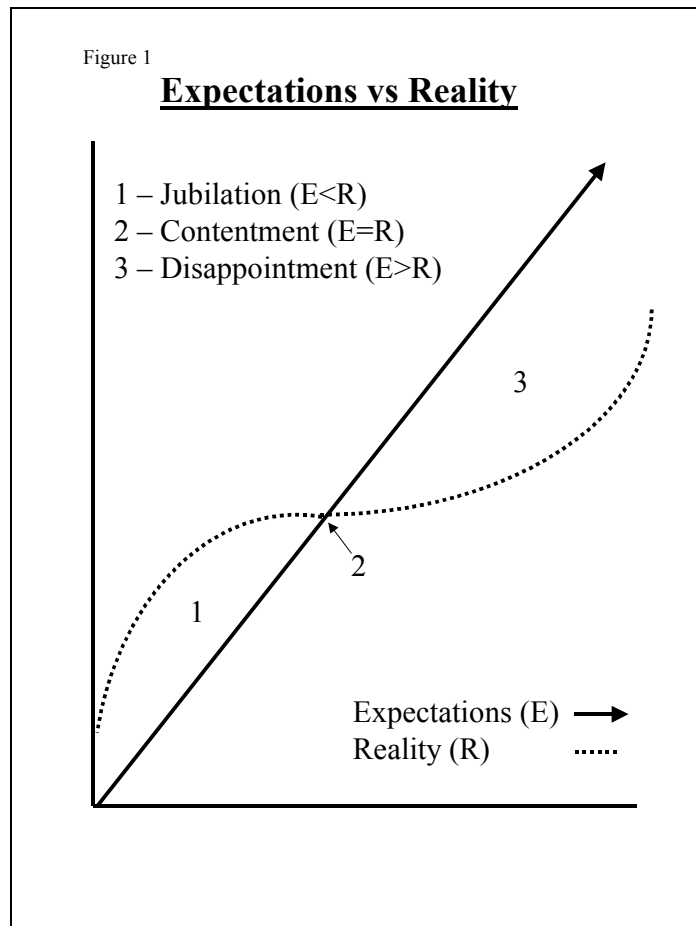
In the military leader – subordinate relationship, however, I would propose that the impact of expectations on satisfaction is even more profound. The mathematical analogy would look more like this:

$$\text{Subordinate Satisfaction} = \frac{\text{Your "Performance"}}{(\text{Subordinate Expectations})^2}$$

Richard Scholl, in describing a 1974 study of dissatisfaction and alienation in a group of nurses, refers to the discrepancy between expectations and outcomes as “reality shock”.⁷

I would argue that the even more profound reality shock in the military relationship context is rooted in the cultural expectations of leaders’ duties and responsibilities to their subordinates. Likewise, military discipline, the military justice system, the ethical imperatives of the profession of arms and the concept of “unlimited liability” place increased expectations on leadership performance. In other words, military subordinate reality shock is more intensely impacted by expectations than we see in Karten’s analogy.

Figure 1, developed by the author in consultation with Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Uchiyama, is a simplified graphic illustration of the psychological impact of outcomes when contrasted with individual expectations.⁸ When reality meets with an individual's expectations, the person is satisfied or contented. A student, for example, who through past experience, level of effort et cetera expects to achieve a 70% grade on an examination is contented or satisfied when achieving the expected grade. Had the student been awarded a 95% grade, clearly higher than the 70% expectation, (s)he would be more than simply contented and jubilation would be the outcome. Disappointment, on the other hand, comes when reality fails to meet expectations; what our student would feel, for example, with a 45% grade. Although it is impossible to quantify, the level of jubilation or disappointment is proportional to the delta between expectations and reality. The reader should note that Figure 1 is a highly simplified model that does not demonstrate more complex situations or effects such as the impact that present performance would have on future expectations.



The application of this background information is found in how subordinate behaviour or performance is influenced by expectations. The next two short theoretical sections will deal with subordinate self-expectations and the expectations they have for their leaders and the overall organization, and their impact on motivation.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

“Conveying high expectations by a credible, authoritative source evidently motivates subordinates to mobilize more of their own resources to perform well.”⁹

Pygmalion, a Cypriot king, carved a statue of a beautiful woman and soon fell in love with it. Aphrodite took pity on him and turned the statue into a real woman named Galatea. Thus Pygmalion’s dreams or expectations for his statue became a reality. What

sociologists call the Pygmalion and Galatea effects, respectively, are that subordinate behaviour tends to be influenced by supervisory expectations and by what subordinates believe is expected of them.¹⁰

The Pygmalion self-fulfilling prophecy has been borne out in numerous trials and studies.¹¹ One of the more militarily pertinent experiments related by Eden involved applying the self-fulfilling prophecy to a group of fifteen habitually low performing United States Navy personnel. Not only did intervention focus on the subjects' direct supervisors, it included selected higher-level leaders. The combination of increased expectations in both supervisory groups, communicated in terms of direct supervisory input as well as "big picture Navy" expectations, led to dramatic results. Increased self-expectations in the subject group were reflected in significant improvements in discipline and performance in comparison to two control groups. Eden goes on to conclude that; ". . . the communication of high expectations by supervisors to subordinates [is] an important component of leadership behaviour."¹²

Subordinate Expectations of Leader / Organization

*"Violated expectations generate conflict."*¹³

We will now switch channels and look at subordinate expectations of leadership, or what is referred to as *expectancy*, and its impact on motivation. Culligan, Deakins and Young define motivation as "the drive to achieve a goal". They go on, however, to look behind the motivation at the overall personal objective which is to: ". . . derive a benefit from the result."¹⁴ A mathematical analogy they developed follows:

$$\mathbf{G + N + R = PP}$$

G = Goal (business or behavioural)

N = Needs (tangible or intangible)

R = Rewards

PP = Productive [motivated] Performance

Given that the G, N and R side of the equation is not necessarily fulfilled concurrently with the PP side, the expectation of future fulfillment is often the motivator. This is the genesis of Expectancy Theory.¹⁵

Zierden makes it clear that some expectations are already in effect before the leader has any contact with a new member. In other words a person brings to the job a pre-determined set of expectations about:

“what should be provided by work in terms of intrinsic satisfaction, extrinsic rewards, and the potential for personal growth and career development. Such expectations are developed in an individual through prior educational experience, socio-cultural experience and prior work experience. . . . These intra-psychic phenomena might be called sociologically derived expectations.”¹⁶

Through communication, the leader modifies these baseline expectations and adds to the left side of the above equation. When the leader and / or the organization meet or exceed the expectations, the subordinate is contented or even jubilant, and motivation and performance are maintained or increased. However, the failure to meet subordinate expectations leads to disappointment, decreased motivation, decreased confidence in the leader and / or organization and, ultimately, a decrease in performance or even separation. Bass sums it up succinctly when he states: “We like and value those who behave according to our expectations.”¹⁷

In just one of a myriad of possible examples of the results of fulfillment or failure to fulfill expectations, we can look at Canadian Forces member grievances.

Despite improvements over the past few years, the preponderance of grievances still relate to Personnel Evaluation Reports. The old leadership adage that “a person should not hear about a shortcoming for the first time during a Personnel Evaluation Report interview,” applies in spades. Failure to communicate the shortcoming, offer guidance and give the member the opportunity to improve performance actually communicates the message that the individual is performing well, thereby engendering high expectations regarding the formal evaluation. The result of the violated expectation is a de-motivated member and conflict, in the form of a grievance.

In this, as well as the previous section, the article painted a fairly black and white picture of the motivational and behavioral influences of met, exceeded or violated expectations. Life, of course, is never so simple. The next section will, therefore, concentrate on influences that can modify the impact of expectations.

Modifying Influences

There is an old adage that says: “you can’t please all the people all the time.” When coupled with the realization that many people remain loyal to organizations that have dashed their expectations, it begs questions of the validity or, at least the impact, of expectancy as a motivating force. The answer is found in what is termed “commitment.”

“Viewing commitment and expectancy as two independent behavioral forces makes it possible to explain instances of commitment not explicable according to exchange or expectancy theories, such as remaining with an organization despite reward valences being reduced, inequity developing, and expectations not being met.”¹⁸

Scholl goes on to define commitment as “a stabilizing influence that acts to maintain behavioral direction when expectancy / equity conditions are not met.”¹⁹

An individual’s commitment to an organization tends to grow with time. It is built upon the energy invested therein, the perceived debt owed, diminished external opportunities and the fact that one’s social identity becomes linked to the organization. Commitment is an extremely powerful force in the military context. Given the unique culture, coupled with concepts such as the sense of teamwork, belonging, service above self, et cetera, one can begin to understand why personnel would remain with the military despite violated expectations.

On a similar vein, Pygmalion is also subject to modifying influences. Over time individuals mature and gain experience, and they develop less malleable self-images. Although the self-fulfilling prophecy does not disappear, it is modified by past realities. In other words: “Their own aspirations, and the expectations of their superiors, become increasingly controlled by the reality of their past performance.”²⁰

While we can show that other forces can modify expectancy and Pygmalion effects, they are still very powerful in their own right. The generation and fulfillment of expectations modify motivation and behaviour, and the management of expectations is a valuable tool for leaders to employ. Before discussing the management of expectations, however, it is important to consider some ethical questions.

Ethical Questions

“When the ancients did not speak out, it was because they were ashamed to say what they could not live up to themselves.”²¹

Confucius

Dov Eden contends that:

“The deception inherent in the Pygmalion paradigm precludes informed consent. To the extent that the manipulation results in beneficial gains the deception is justified.”²²

Although Eden is referring to the application of Pygmalion in the context of scientific experimentation, the same ethical question applies to the practical application thereof.

Does the end justify the means? Each leader must consider this question when attempting to modify expectations. Likewise the leader must consider the possible outcomes of failed expectations. If the leader generates unrealistically high or unachievable self-expectations, what will be the impact on the individual when failure inevitably occurs? The military leader should also consider the differing ethical imperatives in wartime versus peacetime. If employing Pygmalion in combat motivates the troops to achieve victory, or if it saves their lives, does the end justify the means?

Ethical questions also apply to the expectancy effect. Rewards, especially extrinsic rewards, are more tangible and quantifiable than the results of self-expectations. When the leader communicates and generates reward expectations, an unwritten contract is created with subordinates. The leader fulfills the ethical imperative through the energy (s)he discharges in striving to meet the contractual obligation. In a simple example, falsely engendering, unrealistically high reward expectations would clearly be an ethical failure.

This article is not meant to be an ethical discussion or dissertation. Indeed, the final ethical decisions are clearly those of the leader. Suffice it to point out, however,

that the leader should carefully consider the ethical questions when striving to manage expectations.²³

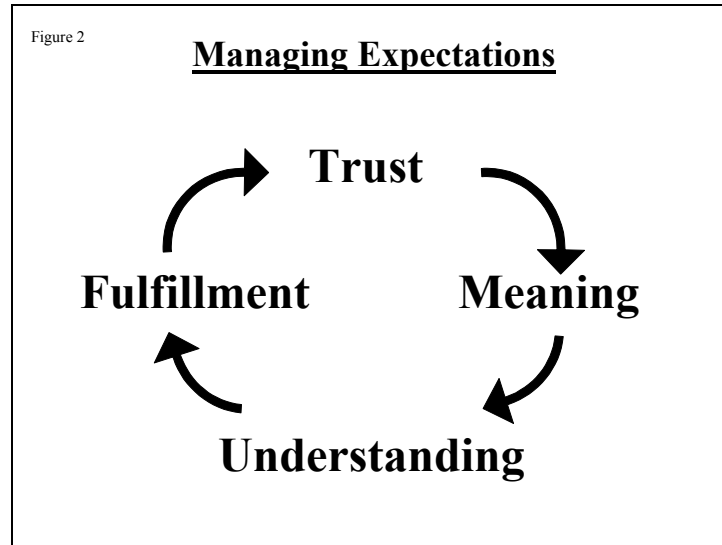
Managing Expectations

“Lowered expectations are the key to a happy life.”²⁴
Red Green

If one was to take Red Green literally, and the leader’s sole objective was to have happy subordinates, the management of expectations would be very simple. All the leader would have to do would be to ensure that subordinate expectations were low enough that outcomes would always exceed them. (Un)fortunately Red’s leadership does not extend past Possum Lodge. The objective of expectation management is to motivate subordinates to behave in a desired manner and strive to achieve the leader’s goals.²⁵

“As molders of expectations, inspirational leaders can redirect their organizations with clear agendas of what needs to be done. They know enough not to be satisfied with easy panaceas. They also are able to avoid letting their enthusiasm trap them into creating unrealistic expectations in their subordinates and uninvited acceptance of their ideas.”²⁶

As discussed earlier, when leaders communicate they generate or change subordinate expectations. It follows that expectations are managed through communications. However, managing expectations is not a simple, quantifiable process whereby a leader decides to generate an expectation and proceeds to communicate it. It is a complex and continuing cyclical process that requires nurturing and follow-up. The process includes developing trust and credibility, managing meaning, managing understanding and fulfilling expectations. Figure 2 is a simplified diagram of the expectation management cycle.



Although positional authority initially adds the power of expectancy to a leader’s communications, reality shock can eventually undermine the influence. The leader must therefore develop trust and credibility. This is primarily achieved through non-verbal communication, in that the leader develops trust and credibility through personal behaviour and the fulfillment of expectations. Setting the example, “walking the talk”, rewarding performance and responsiveness to subordinate needs, being but a few examples.

The management of meaning is about ensuring that the desired meaning is the one conveyed to subordinates. Beyond the theoretical aspects of meaning management, this is the act of communicating the message that targets subordinate expectations. Given that the “how” aspects of internal communications are beyond the scope of this article, the reader is invited to consult the recommended readings outlined in the endnotes for theoretical and practical guidance.²⁷ Managing understanding, on the other hand, involves verifying that the desired impact on expectations has been achieved and following through by adjusting the message (expectation) if required. The

communication concept of feedback is employed, as well as confirming that the desired performance or behaviour modification is being carried out. The final step in the cycle is fulfilling subordinate expectations. In an expectancy case it means meeting the ethical dimension of the expectation contract. In the Pygmalion context, the leader must ensure that subordinates have the resources, training, leadership and organization necessary to give them the greatest chance of fulfilling engendered performance expectations. Fulfillment in both cases re-engages the entire process by engendering trust and confidence for future interactions.

Strategic Level Internal Communications

“A great obstacle to happiness is to expect too much happiness.”²⁸
Bernard de Fontenelle

The management of expectations through internal communication applies throughout the chain of command. The strategic level, however, faces some unique challenges when compared to lower levels, given the complexity of issues being worked, greater time horizons and larger, more diverse audiences. However, separation in terms of distance, access and rank does not diminish the importance of expectations generated or changed by the strategic level. Indeed, cultural expectations are strongly influenced, if not engendered, by strategic leadership. Likewise, the expectations generated, fulfilled or failed by the strategic level are often viewed from below as the success or failure of the entire organization.

The work of strategic leaders includes creating the vision of the organization and leading the change it initiates.²⁹ Communicating the vision, or leading change, are other words for managing expectations from the strategic level. Smircich and Morgan, contend that leaders at the organizational or strategic level: “. . . provide members of the

organization with a sense that they are organized, even amidst an everyday feeling that at a detailed level everything runs the danger of falling apart.”³⁰ Notwithstanding the greater complexity and broader impact of strategic level communications, the expectations management process model still applies. Instead of going step by step through the model, however, for the purposes of this article we will explore a current Canadian Forces strategic level initiative and apply the model to it.

A good working example (using expectancy but not Pygmalion) can be found in Shaping the Future of the Canadian Forces: A Strategy for 2020. The document states that the Canadian Forces will “Position Defence as an employer of choice.”³¹ A profound strategic level statement such as this clearly engenders certain expectations throughout the entire membership of the Canadian Forces and is therefore an ideal example to be tested against the expectations management model.

We will enter the model at the trust and credibility step. Beyond their positional authority, and if we are to take the example in isolation, strategic leaders could assume that the trust and credibility step in the process had been successfully accomplished based upon past expectation fulfillment. In other words strategic leaders would likely assume that the expectations they are striving to engender enjoy the power of subordinate trust and confidence. This means that strategic leaders would be reasonably comfortable that their subordinates would be receptive to the vision and that it would engender the desired expectations. However, if we are not to take the example in isolation, or if leaders were not convinced that they had the trust and confidence of Canadian Forces members, they would probably wish to ascertain trust levels and take corrective action to correct shortfalls. This is clearly not a simple “cut and dried” or exact scientific process. The

expectation management model is cyclical and it repeats itself time and again, with the results of one cycle or group of cycles profoundly influencing the trust levels of subsequent expectation management processes. For the sake of proceeding with our example, and given that the vision is already “on the street”; we must assume that the desired level of trust has been engendered.

This brings us to the management of meaning. Perhaps we should assume that the visionary statement, and the qualifying statements and milestones that accompany it in “Strategy 2020”, were developed with due consideration to the expectations they would generate and that meaning management was conducted. This would generate an *expectation* in the strategic leaders that the Canadian Forces membership, individually and at large, have accepted this reward expectation and that they will be motivated to embrace the performance expectations articulated elsewhere in the vision. However, it is time for a “reality check” of our assumptions. The problem with our example thus far is that a great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the meaning management step. What portion of the membership has even read the vision, and of them what portion embrace it? What of those who do not respond well to written communication? Were they orally briefed on the vision? Has each layer in the chain of command embraced the vision and have they included it in their internal communications? The uncertainty examples could go on and on, but the point is that many factors must be considered when communicating or managing meaning. An effective communications plan, developed by competent internal communications experts and carried out by the leadership should remove some of the uncertainty. Assuming that a communications plan was developed and effectively executed, we will proceed with the example.

The management of understanding has a great deal to do with removing the uncertainty left by the first two steps. Do members understand what being “an employer of choice means” to the leadership or do they simply see it as “more pay for less work?” Have the desired **realistic** expectations been engendered and is behaviour modification happening? Do the expectations have to be adjusted? It would be easy to say that the answer can simply be found through member feedback, but the reality is much more complex. Strategic leaders are separated from the rank and file by distance, rank and access. Additionally, the layers within the chain of command tend to buffer or even change communication as it moves up and down the pyramid. Strategic leaders therefore have to be very careful to ensure that they are receiving the right message. This uncertainty is what stimulates leaders to employ management techniques such as surveys and leadership techniques such as direct communication or “leadership by walking around.”

The fourth step in our example will have to be left open ended. After all, “Strategy 2020” is a twenty-year vision and members cannot reasonably *expect* all the *expected* rewards to appear in year two or three (assuming, of course, that this was clarified in the previous steps). This does not, however, let strategic leaders off the hook. The expectation contract is in force and leaders will have to show progress with the milestones and communicate the results. Ultimately, the ability of leaders to fulfill or show tangible progress on the “employer of choice” expectation, and all the other expectations the vision has generated, will impact on the trust they earn and their ability to implement Strategy 2025, 2030, 2035 et cetera.

We can see from this highly simplified example that effective strategic level internal communication is a complex process that can be fraught with pitfalls. Although all the steps in the expectations management process are very important, the most important is the fulfillment – trust relationship. Without expectation fulfillment, reality shock will erode trust. And without trust, the future of the vision (as well as subsequent visions) will be jeopardized by diminished member motivation.

Conclusion

A disciple asked Confucius about government.

Confucius said, "See to it that there is enough food, enough arms, and the trust of the people in government."

The disciple asked, "If one of these unavoidably had to be omitted, which one of the three would be first?"

Confucius said, "Omit arms."

The disciple asked, "If one of the remaining two unavoidably had to be omitted, which would go first?"

Confucius said, "Omit food. Since ancient times people have died, but nothing can be established without the trust of the people."³²

Expectations are an extremely powerful force that profoundly impact motivation and behaviour. This article briefly summarized Pygmalion and Expectancy Effects and showed that expectations can and should be managed through effective internal communications. An example of expectation management was employed to highlight the complexity and challenges of strategic level internal communications. While the article discussed some of the “why” behind internal communications, the details of the “what” and “how” were left to the communications experts.

Leaders must prudently manage the expectations their internal communications generate. This is accomplished through a four step cyclical process that includes developing trust, managing meaning, managing understanding and fulfilling member expectations. The key element is trust, because without it subordinates will not accept the leader’s desired expectations and modify their behaviour in the desired manner.

Likewise, the only way to develop and maintain trust is by meeting the unwritten contract: fulfilling subordinate expectations in the leader and giving subordinates the requisite tools to complete the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Notes

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- ¹ Bass. Handbook. 341.
- ² See (Bass, Handbook. 341), (DePree. 101-108), (Adair. Part 3), (Wholey), (Treece and Kleen), (Yates), (Skopec) and (Culligan, Yates and Young).
- ³ See Treece and Kleen, Chapter 1.
- ⁴ Steven Hawking in www.bemorecreative.com.
- ⁵ Treece and Kleen. 8.
- ⁶ Karten. 1.
- ⁷ Scholl. 592.
- ⁸ Lieutenant-Colonel Uchiyama is a psychologist employed in ADM(HR-Mil), NDHQ.
- ⁹ Eden. 66.
- ¹⁰ Bass. Handbook. 213.
- ¹¹ See (Eden), (Bass. Handbook), (Zierden), (Scott & Bruce), (Balkwell), (Madden), (Feather) and (Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair & Xin). For slightly divergent theories see (Scholl) and (Taylor).
- ¹² Eden. 66-67.
- ¹³ Bass. Handbook. 281.
- ¹⁴ Culligan, Deakins & Young. Ch. 5.
- ¹⁵ Much of the theoretical background to Culligan, Deakins & Young is rooted in Exchange, Expectancy and Equity Theories. Although space precludes doing justice to these theories in the article, the interested reader should consult (Scholl), (Madden), (Feather), (Zierden) and (Rousseau).
- ¹⁶ Zierden. 306-307.
- ¹⁷ Bass. Handbook. 177.
- ¹⁸ Scholl. 589.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. 593.
- ²⁰ Eden. 71.
- ²¹ Confucius. 73.
- ²² Eden. 71.
- ²³ For a general discussion on ethics in communications see Treece and Kleen, Ch. 2.
- ²⁴ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The Red Green Show. December 2001.
- ²⁵ For a somewhat dissenting view see Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair & Xin.
- ²⁶ Bass, Handbook. 213.
- ²⁷ For a detailed theoretical discussion on the management of meaning see Smircich and Morgan. Treece and Kleen, Skopec and Yates, on the other hand, offer practical advice on how to effectively communicate.
- ²⁸ Bernard de Fontenelle in www.motivationalquotes.com.
- ²⁹ Neumann. 11-15.
- ³⁰ 260.
- ³¹ 6, 10.
- ³² Confucius. 111.

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