

Great Expectations: Escaping the Low Expectation Trap

By James Omgig, Shawn Mayo, and Richard Davis

The Low Expectation Trap

One of the most devastating things that can happen to any human being is to be trapped in the prison of low expectations. For most blind people, this condition has been the norm rather than the exception. Throughout recorded history, blind people have been regarded as inferiors – inept and helpless wards who need to be taken care of by sighted persons. They have not been expected to think for themselves, care for themselves, work in competitive employment, or contribute to society. These low expectations can be termed “soft bigotry,” because they result from an unintended consequence rather than an intentional wrong.

A Harvard researcher, Robert Rosenthal, demonstrated the impact of good intentions and lowered expectations in a study he made in 1964 and 1965. He conducted his study in a school in which each grade was divided into fast, medium, and slow groups. After testing, he assigned each student to one of the groups. His followup showed the students in each group performing as expected. The problem was, instead of making assignments based on their test scores, Rosenthal had assigned them to each group on a totally random basis. As a result of this “interpersonal expectancy effect”, Rosenthal concluded that “one person’s expectation for another’s behavior could come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy,”

In work with the blind, expectations are everything, and they are typically far too low. These expectations, based on longstanding misconceptions about blindness, become absorbed by blind persons, their families, training center staff, and other state agency personnel, creating a negative, self-perpetuating culture that does little to help blind persons, and much harm instead. Orientation and adjustment center training can fail if expectations for student performance are not based on a standard that is more comparable to sighted performance standards.

In his book, *We Know Who We Are*, Dr. Ronald J. Ferguson describes a totally blind student named Jessica who was given two weeks of assessment as part of the preparation of her rehabilitation plan, to determine her vocational interests, academic achievement, and college potential. Academic testing showed that, although only in ninth grade, she had scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher on tests normed for high school seniors and first year college students. The written assessment by the rehabilitation counselor, an expert in blindness, encouraged Jessica, based on her outstanding performance, to consider careers as a secretary, receptionist, customer service representative, or computer operator.

Jessica’s parents permitted her anonymous test scores to be shown to upper level undergraduates majoring in education and graduate students majoring in rehabilitation in a survey conducted at three different universities. Participants were asked to give their impression of her academic potential, and suggest possible careers she could pursue, based on her test results. Overwhelmingly, participants noted she had outstanding academic potential, and suggested engineer, medical doctor, scientist, and lawyer as possible careers. When they were told of the recommendations offered by the rehabilitation counselor, they were mystified.

Omgig and “The Hierarchy of Truth”

James Omgvig, who has directed two orientation centers, developed a new concept concerning expectations which he calls "The Hierarchy of Truth." Omgvig states that "the level of expectations an individual has concerning maximum achievement and success for the blind as a group - or for a particular blind individual - rises or falls in direct proportion to the level of comprehension and internalization that person has concerning the 'truth' about blindness. This is true regardless of whose expectations are being examined - the family, society in general, the blind individual, or particularly, the blindness professional involved."

What is the "truth" about blindness? Blind people are normal, ordinary people who just happen to be blind. They represent a cross-section of society as a whole, with the same strengths, weaknesses, and characteristics as everyone else. Given proper training and opportunity, the average blind person can participate fully in society and can compete on terms of absolute equality with his or her neighbors. It is respectable to be blind. The real problem of blindness is not the loss of eyesight itself, but the public's misunderstandings, misconceptions, and superstitions about it. The blind are a minority in every sense of the term, and subject to the same kinds of discrimination as any other minority group.

Omgvig says that professionals who know the truth about blindness are more likely to set proper (i.e.: normal) expectations for their blind customers. In order for their customers to be successful, they must do so despite customer skepticism, then must follow up with services that will raise their customers' expectations and skills to a normal level, empowering them. In general, expectations should be the same as they would be if blindness were removed from the equation. It is not the function of blindness professionals to pigeonhole customers into stereotyped occupations, protect them from failure, or discourage them from pursuing their dreams. Instead, they must expand their customers' horizons, help them fully explore their potential, and provide encouragement, support, and hope for the future.

Communicating Expectations in a Center Setting

There are a number of practical ways to communicate higher expectations in a center setting. The center is the ideal environment to change individual expectations because it provides day to day contact with the real world along with a supportive environment in which the challenges faced by students can be discussed. The major mechanism for such discussions is the seminar, in which students learn the truth about blindness, come to understand how public misconceptions affect their lives, and develop strategies for dealing with those misconceptions.

A second way to communicate higher expectations is by eliminating negative messages imbedded in the center's culture. When Richard Davis became administrator of the New Mexico Orientation Center, he discovered that each student was expected to sit in an assigned seat in the lunchroom, take their medications from little cups next to their plates, and sit there and be waited on by sighted dormitory staff. That same staff rang a bell to tell them when to wake up, when to come to breakfast, and when to go to class. During center coffee breaks, the sighted staff brought coffee and food to the students and the blind staff. Because students were expected to park their canes when entering the building and walk around without them, there was at least one major collision each day.

The message given to each student by the above was crystal clear: blind people, even blind professionals, had to be cared for by sighted persons. They could not find their own seats, serve themselves, figure out which pills to take, get to places on time, or travel safely and independently. Whatever skills of independence the teachers taught in the classes were negated by low expectations imbedded in the center's culture. It was necessary to change the culture and the expectations before the center could produce effective graduates. Davis did so by spending a lot of one on one time working with the students to raise their expectations, then working with the staff to raise theirs, until the culture changed and started to support the training students received.

Shawn Mayo will explain how her beliefs about blindness and herself were changed by going through BLIND, Inc. where she learned about her own misconceptions about blindness and resulting lowered expectations she held for herself. She became strong through a combination of training in skills and training in attitudes. Early on, she learned the value of effective public education about blindness and concerted action to solve the problems of blind people. As the Executive Director of BLIND, Incorporated, she supports both a strong curriculum and the value of peer support and networking. She will demonstrate that when expectations are built into a center's curriculum, the instruction and student activities themselves send the message. When the expectations are picked up by students and passed on to newer ones through peer support, they are strengthened and expanded.

Why is there such a high unemployment/underemployment rate for adult blind persons? The problem starts with low expectations. If rehabilitation professionals reinforce public attitudes about blindness, and provide the kind of training and services that tell blind persons they really aren't capable of much, then they poison the well from which their customers must drink. If, however, they take a position based on the real truth about blindness and build in the kind of expectations that tell their customers that they are just as good and capable as anyone else, they provide a refreshing drink that makes their customers strong, and results on their success. The outcome of high expectations in rehabilitation will be effective blind persons who are an asset to any organization, and are able to live and compete successfully with their sighted neighbors.