When most of us hear the term, “the placebo effect,” we think of drug trials and the tendency for some patients to experience positive results even when, rather than receiving the drug in question, they are given a harmless pill with no therapeutic benefits. Studies show that patients experience results because they believe they have been given the drug and are confident the drug will work. Belief is so powerful in influencing outcomes that it can actually help terminal patients live long lives. It explains why certain treatments that just seem odd or ridiculous actually seem to do people good. It also explains why people are able to do extraordinary, “impossible” things, like breaking world records, winning elections, or becoming a cultural phenomenon.

A recent article in the Harvard Health Letter (April 4, 2012) discusses the “growing recognition that what we call the placebo effect may involve changes in brain chemistry.” In other words, it’s not just a fluke. The article goes on to talk about the role of expectations: “Expectations appear to have a lot to do with the effect. If an intervention is believed to help a condition, a certain percentage of people who receive it will experience some benefit.”

“The placebo effect” plays out at work much in the same way. Expectations, directed toward yourself, or your employees, will ultimately affect outcomes. Simply put, when you tell yourself you can or can’t do something, you not only predict your future; you make your future. Remember that famous Henry Ford quote? “Whether you think you can, or think you can’t — you’re right.” It’s like that. If you believe you got the drug that will save your life and that it will work, it just might.

The same is true for your employees. For example, when you tell them, “We’re in for a fight,” you are telling them it’s inevitable. Since you’re the boss, they believe you. Now your staff is in “fighting mode,” on the defensive and approaching every situation with hostility. Pretty soon, your company is in a full-on battle with whichever competitor or vendor you predicted you’d end up fighting.

If, on the other hand, you told your employees something like, “This situation will be resolved easily and peaceably,” you’d have “placeboed” your team into being a calm, rational staff behaving in a way that would ensure that your prediction is true. Again, they believe you, and the appropriate action follows belief. That is the power of the mind.

I think back to an employee we nicknamed “Shaq.” He was short, and so obviously the name was ironic. But it was really an enabling name, because the real Shaq is a successful basketball player, an icon. We could have called our guy “Stretch,” but calling him “Shaq” pumped him up. He owned the name, performing above our expectations every single day.

Hire two identical people and call one “Flounder” and the other “Falcon,” and I’ll tell you which one has a better shot at success. (Hint: It ain’t “Flounder.”)

In his book Get Anyone to Do Anything (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000), David Lieberman, Ph.D. references a study about the “powerful role of expectations.” He states: “Assembly line workers who were told that the job was complex and difficult performed less efficiently at the same task than those who were told that it was easy and simple.”

Entrepreneurs have a tendency to dramatize the work required when hiring new employees. I’ve been guilty of this myself. We work hard, oftentimes doing the job of ten people, and when it comes time to hire someone, we want them to feel our pain. So we tell them, “It’s not going to be easy, but...” or “You’ll have to make sacrifices and work long hours, but...” We set them up for a challenge, and what do you know — the job is far from easy, and pretty soon your staff is suffering from the same work-life balance issues you had experienced when you were solo.

Rather than predict difficulty, stress and strain, set positive expectations for your employees. Tell them, “It’s going to be easy, and we’re going to work well together. Let’s get to it.” (Leave out the “but,” no matter how tempted you are to throw it in!) Your employees will believe you, and those who don’t will probably experience the same outcome because they will be surrounded by a team of people who do believe.

References: