

# What can an economist teach us about motivation?

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In their book [Sway- The Irresistible Force of Irrational Behavior](#), authors Ori and Rom Brafman offer interesting insights into human behavior. Using tools and examples from both psychology and economics they outline some of the reasons people persist in behaving in irrational ways. That is, they attempt to explain why we sometimes do things that make absolutely no sense.

As teachers, we can reflect on an economic theory called *diagnosis bias* and see how it may play out in our classrooms. When we encounter a new situation, person, event, or idea we immediately make an assessment, or diagnosis. That assessment is based on appearances, what other people say, how other people act, past experiences, or emotional reactions, to name a few. We then label these ideas, people, or situations based on our assessments and diagnosis. *Diagnosis bias*, as the authors explain it, is a person's inability to reconsider those initial judgments once they've been made. It is common for people, once the diagnosis has been made, to stick to a belief regardless of the rationality of it. We've all known people who have stuck to an assumption or persisted in a behavior even when there was evidence that they were wrong.

For teachers, here is the real trap of diagnosis bias according to the Brafman brothers, "When we brand or label people, they take on the characteristics of the diagnosis." Consider something psychologists have studied for years, the Pygmalion Effect. This is when people take on the positive traits assigned to them by someone else. Haven't we all been told of examples of how a student or a class "lived up to the expectations" and became great because the teacher expected them to? When we highlight positive characteristics and hold high expectations, students inevitably respond. Psychologists also study Golem Effect - when a person takes on the *negative* traits assigned to them by someone else. We've all seen students who gave up because they were labeled or held to low standards.

So, what does all of this have to do with student motivation? First, recognize the power of diagnosis bias and give every student an opportunity. Ask yourself, "Is there evidence that my diagnosis about a student may be wrong?" Students need not only our grace and patience, but they need be told positive things about their ideas, situation, or character. Both the Pygmalion and Golem effects are powerful in that a student likely has a pretty good idea of what their teachers think about them. If a student doesn't think that a teacher truly believes in them, then why try? (*If the teacher thinks I'm an average student, then I'll be average.*) A student that appears to lack motivation may indeed be living down to the expectations of those around them.