Book Review

The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail

By Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux (2002).
Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002. 280 pages, hardcover, $26.95.

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Ever wonder if effective managers really guide subordinates toward becoming valuable workers? Are all good managers fair and impartial with their subordinates? Even if one believes both answers to these questions to be an astounding yes, this book, *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail,* will challenge that perspective. The concepts the authors offer are remarkable and might influence practitioners and scholars alike. This book explores how manager's expectations influences a subordinate's performance, thereby influencing productivity of that particular employee positive or negatively.

Extensive research outlined in this book identifies how managers' actions toward employees may actually contribute to poor employee performance. Effective managers continually evaluate employee performance. However, research indicates that once a manager identifies and assigns an employee to the two categories of performers (strong or weak), which can happen as early as five days from when an employee is hired, the manager collects evidence to support his/her conclusions about that employee (a self-fulfilling prophecy).

All employees are categorized by their managers as being either in the in-crowd or out-crowd. When employees are defined as being weaker performers or outside of the in-crowd, the employee's performance levels are a part of a self-fulfilling prophecy created by the managers and enforced by the subordinates. When this happens, the "set-up-to-fail syndrome" has begun to take its course.

For instance: An employee named Bill loses an important client for his company. After this incident Bill's manager Ted assigns him to the preverbal "out-crowd" and Ted sets out to justify this assignment by observing Bill's performance more carefully and picking out behavior that supports his assessment of Bill as a weak performer. Based on his assumptions Ted makes several changes in his interactions with Bill based on the assumption that Bill is a weak employee. Ted might then assign someone to work with Bill. This action sends the message to Bill that he "needs help" and Ted does not trust him, thus causing Bill to be less susceptible to coaching or feedback of any kind due to the lack of trust. Many times this type of behavior leads to more disciplinary action and reduced morale between the boss and subordinate.

Each chapter explains a different part of the syndrome, eventually prescribing a cure. The first part of the book explains how the syndrome is formed through perceptions and biases and how these factors affect both managers and subordinates. The cycle begins when a manager identifies a worker as a weak performer. Research indicates that this judgment can be based on a single incident. With this perception in place, the manager begins to exhibit certain behaviors to reinforce his/her belief. Typical managerial behavior consists of; assigning more routine tasks with deadlines, limiting the subordinate's decision making, and constantly following up with the subordinate to insure everything is getting done. Also, the manager tends to be more distant physically and emotionally. The subordinate in turn, will give up trying to prove the boss wrong and will often perform the tasks assigned but will fail to contribute to the team or company by suggesting anything new for fear of rejection. When these subordinates are managers as well, they tend to be less inclined to give out orders to their subordinates and have trouble motivating them as well.

When the weaker performers end up with the disappointing results that the manager predicted, the manager's expectations are reinforced. Unfortunately, it was the manager's lack of trust and micromanagement skills that led the subordinate to believe that their opinions are not valued or wanted and hence fulfill their boss's low expectation of them (*remember the earlier example of Bill and Ted*). If the perceived weaker performer exceeds a manager's expectations, the manager dismisses the results as a fluke in order to keep their perception of the weaker performer.

How could this happen? The way managers behave with perceived weaker performers totally is in direct opposition as to the way they treat the perceived stronger performers. With the weaker performers, managers have a tendency to be more direct when discussing tasks and goals. Managers let subordinates know what needs to be done and how it should be done. When a manager deals with a perceived stronger performer; however, the subordinate's ideas are encouraged and they are given the adequate amount of space to carry out those ideas. In this way, the weaker performers are given less room for their own input and become more robotic where the stronger performers are allowed to be more autonomous.

Looking further at our earlier example of this syndrome, Bill then interacts with Ted in ways that perpetuates Ted's assumptions. Bill might meet with "the helper" but completes the bare minimum because he fears the more he does increases the chances that Ted will find something else he is doing wrong. Ted does find errors in Bill's work because he is looking for errors because he fully assumes that since Bill is a poor performer he makes mistakes. Ted addresses Bill with his mistakes and Bill begins to feel he can not do anything right so he withdraws further. Bills morale is low and he performs at a low-level due to this low motivation level. Ted sees this in the continuing decline of Bill's sales; therefore again reaffirming that Bill is a poor performer and needs more "help." This situation could continue until Bill quits or is let go. Then someone new will be hired and the process can start all over again.

The latter part of the book discusses how the syndrome negatively affects an organization and how to plan an effective intervention to annihilate the syndrome. When the syndrome is present and thriving, it costs the organization time and money. Managers lose out by putting forth extra time and effort in micromanaging their weaker performers. Manager's reputations as leaders also suffer because other workers begin to view the manager's actions toward perceived weaker performers as being unfair and unsupportive. The human resource department would be approached for further training opportunities for the weaker performers and even possible replacement. This forces the human resource department to focus on recruitment verses employees development. Also, when perceived weaker performers work in a team, that team's morale tends to decrease and goals are not completed effectively.

The syndrome affects an organization externally as well. The company serves as a poor advertisement to customers and suppliers when it is not running efficiently. Although attempts can be made to cover up the syndrome, external guests still are able to sense the low morale of the team.

In order to destroy the syndrome, an intervention must be planned. Managers must be willing to accept their role in the creation of the syndrome. Also, they must take care not to put the subordinates in defensive positions by not building boundaries prior to the intervention meeting. The purpose of the intervention is to identify the problems, not the symptoms, and develop a progressive plan that will help lead both manager and subordinate in a more effective working relationship.

Using the Bill and Ted scenario again, we will illustrate a method of intervention. Tom a former manager to Bill is transferred as a co-worker to Bill and Ted's region. Tom has high regard for Bill and through conversations with Ted, explains that Ted plays a role in Bill's poor morale. Ted begins to reframe the situation and determines that Bill recognizes that there is a problem and wants to correct the problem just as much as Ted does. Ted sets up a meeting to discuss the situation with Bill. If Ted fails to take responsibility for his participation in the problem and tries to work on Bill's contribution, then the intervention will not succeed. Ted calls the meeting with much preparation on his part as to analyzing the situation from Bill's perspective. Ted and Bill engage in a dialogue about how they got to where they are now in their relationship. This involves candor and a willingness to accept responsibility. Then the two sit down to make a plan so that the situation does not happen again.

This easily read book affords everyone the opportunity for introspection into a down spiral pattern that may exist in any business or organization. Anyone who supervises employees/subordinates will be able to identify personal experiences to relate to the findings and conclusion provided. The benefit is for personal reflection and hopefully an increase of awareness to this syndrome. After reading the material practitioners and scholars alike should be able to identify situations that may lead to this poisonous interaction and work toward a more productive relationship among those involved within the entire organization.

Buy a cheap copy of The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good book by Jean-Louis Barsoux. Does this scenario sound familiar? An employee you manage slips up somehow: a missed deadline, a lost account, or a weak presentation. You decide to oversee that Free shipping over $10.Â We use Cookies to collect information when you visit our site. You can learn more about how we use this information in our Privacy Policy. By closing this banner or continuing to use our site, you consent to our use of Cookies. Accept & Close. The set-up-to-fail syndrome describes a dynamic in which employees perceived to be mediocre or weak performers live down to the low expectations their managers have for them. The result is that they often end up leaving the organizationâ€"either of their own volition or not. J-F Manzoni, J-L Barsoux (1998) The Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome.Â The set-up-to-fail syndrome works in these stages: Event â€" thereâ€™s some minor event between an employee and the boss: could be performance, could be character compatibility, could be differences in work approaches, could be even just miscommunication. Supervision â€" the boss thus increase the supervision, giving more specific instructions and checking if they were completed as expected. HR Management & Compliance. The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail. By Jeff Farthing Sep 10, 2008 HR Management & Compliance.Â The book talks about a supervisor who purportedly has trouble delegating work. Others complain to the supervisorâ€™s boss, and the boss is perplexed about what to do. Because the boss feels responsible for letting the supervisor know about their concerns, and because heâ€™s worried that the supervisorâ€™s career prospects will be limited if his focus is on day-to-day details, he decides to talk to the supervisor. Hereâ€™s how the narrowly framed conversation unfolds, according to Manzoni and Barsoux: Boss: Iâ€™d like to discuss your work with you. The problem stems from the fact that while most managers empower and encourage star performers, they tend to micromanage and control perceived 'weaker' performers in ways that stifle self-confidence and drive. The unwitting result: the latter group lives down to expectations, rather than living up to its true potential. The cost of the Syndrome, say Manzoni and Barsoux, goes well beyond the lost productivity of a few individuals. It also threatens to derail careers, takes a heavy toll on morale, and hampers overall organizational results.Â The cost of the Syndrome, say Manzoni and Barsoux, goes well beyond the lost productivity of a few individuals. It also threatens to derail careers, takes a heavy toll on morale, and hampers overall organizational results.