

## THE SET-UP-TO-FAIL SYNDROME

by Leah Curtin RN PhD(h)



In the March-April 2006 edition of Harvard Business Review, Manzoni and Barsoux predicate that many managers unconsciously set people up to fail! Their article is based on two studies that explore the causal relationship between leadership style and employee performance. The first study, which integrated information from interviews, surveys and observations involved 50 manager-employee pairs. The second study, involving an informal survey of 850 senior managers was undertaken to test and refine the findings generated by the first study).

When asked why an employee performs poorly, managers typically blame the employee. They ascribe their employees' failure to "lack of motivation, lack of skill, insufficient experience, and poor time management skills. Sometimes, this is indeed the case, but in many instances, these authors suggest, it is the *managers* - albeit unintentionally - who may be the root cause of the "failures." Readers may remember studies done involving teachers' expectations of children in grade school: when the teacher was told that a certain child had behavioral problems or learning disabilities (even though they did not), the children performed poorly according to expectations. According to these researchers, this phenomenon also applies to managers and employees. The set-up-to-fail syndrome occurs when a manager observes a problem with performance, forms an opinion (labels) and then unconsciously sets up and periodically reinforces a dynamic that essentially sets up perceived under-performers to fail.

Even if the employee performs superbly, the manager often overlooks this because the negative opinion filters observation. Indeed, bosses tend to attribute the good things that happen to [perceived] weaker performers to external factors rather than their efforts and ability (while the opposite is true for perceived high performers: successes tend to be seen as theirs, and failures tend to be attributed to external, uncontrollable factors)." Happily, the set-up-to-fail syndrome is not irreversible. These researchers suggest that managers can reverse the syndrome, but only if the manager is aware of his/her bias, and is able to overcome it effectively. They suggest:

1. The manager must create the context for the discussion, use the right language (e.g. 'feedback' should be avoided as it suggests a one-way communication), explicitly ask for honest discussion, and admit that his/her behavior may be partially responsible.

2. The manager is the only one of the pair that can initiate an intervention process in which both parties agree on the symptoms.

3. The outcome of the discussion should be a common understanding of what might be causing the weak performance and the setting of performance goals for both of them. If the employee performs poorly, provide immediate feedback. And if the manager engages in the negative dynamics of the set-up-to-fail syndrome, the employee must let him/her know immediately.

Such a conversation is extraordinarily difficult to initiate and execute - so most managers avoid it, even if they are aware that their behavior may be contributing to an employee's failure. "When a boss believes that a subordinate is a weak performer and, on top of everything else, that person also aggravates him, he is not going to be able to cover up his feelings with words; his underlying convictions will come out in the meeting. That is why preparation for the meeting is crucial. Before even deciding to have a meeting, the boss must separate emotion from reality. Was the situation always as bad as it is now? Is the subordinate really as bad as I think he is? What is the hard evidence I have for this belief? Could there be other factors, aside from performance, that have led me to label this employee as a poor performer? Aren't there a few things that he does well? He must have displayed above-average qualifications when we decided to hire him. Did these qualifications evaporate all of a sudden?"

Such reflection is not easy, and it requires a good deal of both self-awareness and self-confidence to even ask of oneself. To actually translate them into a productive meeting with an employee with whom the relationship already is 'shaky' takes a great deal of skill. Why would any manager do this? Well, for one thing 'you hired them, and their failure is your failure.' For another thing, it is expensive and difficult to replace skilled employees today. It just happens to be the right thing to do. Time was when managers thought they were supposed to direct and control. That time is gone now. Today, managers are supposed to 'coach', mentor, and develop. It is, after all, an integral part of your job!

*Dr. Leah Curtin publishes The Journal of Clinical Systems Management, a fact-filled scan of health care in the U.S. She is a member of the adjunct faculty at the University of Cincinnati College of Nursing and is the author of more than 200 articles, 240 editorials and 6 books written for professionals.*

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