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The Down and Outers

Can good managers cause great performers to fail?

In a hyper-competitive business arena, only those organizations efficient in identifying, hiring, and retaining top talent can hope to survive. This mindset however downplays and even at times stifles the development of 'low-flyers'.

Preoccupations!

Superiors like having efficient employees reporting to them. However, not all direct reports are good performers. Managers are often forced to deal with subordinates who are far less proactive, energetic, or conscientious. Such subordinates tax their leader's energy and demand so much of his attention that extricating acceptable performance becomes his major preoccupation. This quite naturally leads to frustration.

'Set-Up-To-Fail' Syndrome

Research shows that most often managers deal with "*satisfactory under-performers*" in a way that not only fails to improve the situation but also worsens it. This phenomenon has been termed as the '*Set-Up-To-Fail*' Syndrome by Jean Francois Manzoni, Assistant Professor of Management, and Jean-Louis Barsoux, Senior Research Fellow at INSEAD.

Suspicion's the killer!

Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome is a vicious spiral that weighs down perfectly reasonable, competent employees. As a result, organizations face waning performance and productivity and are forced to deal with increasing malaise. The culprit in this case is neither the boss nor the subordinate. "*It's just about well-meaning people who get caught in a dysfunctional dynamic.*" So, where does the problem lie?

The root cause of all problems is suspicion. When a boss begins suspecting that his subordinate lacks the 'right stuff', turmoil surfaces in an otherwise healthy relationship.

Performance shortcomings on the part of the subordinate add fuel to the fire. Most studies also reveal the influence of other important factors such as the subordinate's perceived attitude towards his boss rather than his actual performance.

It's routine!

A good manager most often strives to ward off any potential performance problems. He increases the time and attention devoted to his subordinate. For instance, he

- Gives instructions and makes forceful suggestions
- Monitors subordinates' performance more closely
- Insists on validating paperwork documenting those decisions

Such steps must in essence boost performance and prevent the occurrence of any possible error. However, recent studies prove otherwise. They show that performers perceived as

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being weaker often react badly to their boss's increased supervision and control, leading to a decline rather than an improvement in performance. This happens because of three fundamental reasons: confirmation biases, lower expectations, and fewer chances to shine.

Confirmation biases

No sooner does the superior express reservations about his subordinate than confirmation biases set in. The ambiguity of employee behavior in organizations presents outcomes that could be interpreted in many ways. Suspicion on the employee promotes viewing of such ambiguous circumstances negatively. Simply put, most superiors see what they expect to see and remember only what they want to. More importantly, they construe chaotic events in ways that support their initial impressions.

A similar process takes place in organizations when managers identify 'weaker performers' on their teams and start dwelling on their failures and overlook their successes. Most often their success is attributed to luck, circumstances, or support from their peers rather than to the individual's competence and efforts.

Lower expectations

Perception aside, the attitude and behavior of superiors also seem to have a great impact on subordinates. The controlling approach exercised by the superior imposes "*lower expectations*" which gradually de-motivate subordinates.

Lower expectations could be conveyed in several behaviors, like sighs of impatience or frustration, reduced eye contact, indifferent nodding or smiling, and so on. Subordinates are highly sensitive to such signals sent out by their bosses.

Fewer chances to shine

The boss's lack of consideration and motivation does not help a subordinate's performance. Also, there are certain real performance constraints that the perceived weak performer has to face constantly, the most conspicuous being the type of job assignments handed out. The perceived weak performer perennially faces the question, "*How can you prove the boss wrong when all you get are routine tasks?*" Such problems are likely to be compounded by resource-allocation decisions that restrict independence, the possibility of being able to pursue ideas and the subordinate's chances to grow and shine.

Weaker performers are most often criticized for lacking a bigger picture perspective. They tend to be unsophisticated and delve unnecessarily into details. Superiors brand them as those with whom they cannot exchange or engage in give and take. They also complain that their subordinates are inefficient at delegation. However, they fail to realize that unless the subordinates are given autonomy, they will not delegate.

The subordinates in such cases are in a Catch-22 situation - to escape you have to perform better, but in order to be seen as performing better, you need to benefit from the support, attention, and challenges only given to the better performers.

Reverse gear!

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Subordinates find breaking out of the Catch-22 situation very difficult. Most employees give up even trying to change their boss's mind. When they realize that their boss lacks confidence and trust in them, they assume that there must be something wrong with them. This triggers exactly the same cognitive biases in reverse.

Therefore, from the moment the boss is labeled as hard to influence or potentially hostile, the ambiguous actions that he takes will invariably be viewed in a negative light. Employees who see their boss as stubborn tend to register only those instances when the boss was inflexible and unwilling rather than those when he showed openness. As a result, any action that goes against the subordinate would be viewed as unfair and vindictive on the part of the boss rather than as resource constraints.

Employees could also incite their bosses towards bad behavior, in addition to their biased perceptions. They could raise issues that their boss didn't want raised or those that are already settled. Therefore, just as bosses drive their employees to underperform, employees could also drive their bosses to behave unreasonably.

Employees who act in this self-defeating way avoid blame and preserve their self-esteem. Getting the boss to react unreasonably confirms the employee's self-image as a 'reasonable person' simply working for an impossible boss. Each party observes the behavior they were expecting of the other. The result? Two complementary self-fulfilling prophecies coming from opposite directions.

Cure and prevention

Regardless of who triggered the process, the consequences of the conflict through dysfunctional relationship have to be borne by the other team members too. The latter, apart from taking on extra responsibilities, become hapless victims of their 'weaker performing' frustrated colleagues. Team spirit tends to suffer because some employees are overworked while some seem to be underemployed. Such unhealthy dynamics are both curable and preventable. However, communication seems to be the key in both cases.

The cure requires a productive intervention initiated by the superior. Success however depends on the subordinate giving his boss and the intervention process a chance. The process follows a logical sequence: the superior thinks in private, and then calls for an open exchange with the subordinate to agree upon:

- Evidence of poor performance
- The underlying causes of the problem
- Actions demanded of both the parties to improve the situation
- Avoiding relapse of the problem

Prevention of the 'Set-Up-To-Fail' syndrome emphasizes communication between the two parties. Bosses must invest more time and energy in the formative period of the relationship, framing the professional side of the relationship but also developing its positive side.