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### **Winning research project, book examine employees' learning, managers' mistakes**

**By Theresa Minton-Eversole**

The Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Research Committee has named the top human resources research project and book for 2003. This year's winners include research into how employees are motivated to learn, and a book on how managers can actually create an environment where good workers are set up to fail.

The awards were presented during SHRM's Annual Conference and Exposition, held June 22-25 in Orlando, Fla.

The Research Committee evaluates submissions for both awards. The annual SHRM Book Award recognizes new books that help human resource managers maintain high standards and encourages the development and communication of research and insights with practical applications in HR. The winning authors and publisher receive a commemorative plaque.

The SHRM Foundation funds the SHRM Research Award in memory of Dale Yoder and Herbert G. Heneman Jr., professors of industrial relations at the University of Minnesota who helped promote the importance of the HR profession. Entries consist of empirical research addressing current challenges in the HR field. The winner receives a cash award of \$1,000 and a commemorative plaque.

**Motivated workers spend time with e-learning**

The 2003 SHRM Research Award winner, University of Iowa professor Kenneth G. Brown, is assistant professor and Huneke Faculty Research Fellow in the university's Henry B. Tippie College of Business. Brown conducts research on learning and motivation and won the award for his work "Influence of Job Characteristics, Perceived Learning Support and Motivation to Learn on E-learning Activities and Outcomes." The study explores the concept of embedding learning in employees' daily work lives, emphasizing the active role that learners must play to gain new knowledge and skills.



**Brown**

Specifically, it examines the features of the work environment and the extent that job characteristics and perceived learning support influence time spent on e-learning. In addition, it examines how motivation to learn influences the time an employee spends completing online learning activities.

The results of the one-year e-learning pilot that included 311 employees of a large Midwestern university revealed that workload and motivation to learn were important factors in determining which workers would participate in e-learning opportunities, according to Brown. Specifically, employees with the greatest workload who are likely to need training to improve their efficiency were the least likely to spend time learning.

Interestingly, the amount of job autonomy and the level of managerial support for the training had little influence over whether workers with workload issues would participate in the training. However, highly

motivated workers with a high degree of job autonomy were more readily able and willing to pursue training.

The results suggest the need to address organizational infrastructure and policies associated with e-learning offerings.

“Organizations need to be proactive in creating time and perhaps even space within which learning can occur,” wrote Brown. “These efforts can be formal, as in the creation of learning centers, or informal, as in the education of supervisors regarding providing protected time for e-learning.”

Organizations also need to be attentive to employee motivation, Brown added. “The use of incentives might prove valuable, but they also have the potential to stimulate unethical behavior. Concerted efforts to convince employees of the value of e-learning content and methods may prove more useful for stimulating motivation to learn.”

Brown’s published work has appeared in numerous journals and he also received the American Society for Training and Development’s 2002 Research Award. In addition to serving on the editorial board of the *Journal of Management*, Brown consults with organizations regarding the strategic use of employee learning and development.

### **Book urges supervisors to curb micromanaging**

A boss's attitudes and behaviors can cause certain capable employees to fall short, say the authors of the book *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), which received SHRM's



Barsoux



Manzoni

2003 book  
award.

Based on a 10-year study of boss-subordinate relationships, authors Jean-François Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux show that even respected leaders can micromanage and control “weaker” employees—those who are not star performers but also are not under-performers—so much that they stifle self-confidence and drive. Further, by creating and reinforcing a dynamic that essentially sets up these mediocre performers to fail, otherwise capable individuals actually live down to low expectations until they eventually leave.

How does this happen? The syndrome starts like this: An employee makes a mistake that leads the manager to believe the person’s performance is sub-par. The manager spends more time supervising the employee, offering increasing amounts of guidance to help the person do the job. The employee looks at this increased guidance as a lack of supervisory trust and confidence. Attempts to push back seem to have little effect on the manager’s behavior or opinion of the employee. Deprived of most autonomy, the employee starts to doubt his or her capabilities, which affects overall morale and interest in doing a good job. Seeing this, the manager pushes back even harder until the downward spiral in manager-subordinate relationship causes the employee to leave the company.

“The cost of the syndrome,” according to the authors, “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.”

Manzoni and Barsoux explain how managers can:

- Determine whether they are involved in a set-up-to-fail situation.
- Recognize the mental biases that cause bosses to trigger such a cycle.
- Understand how subordinates contribute to the problem.
- Take steps to end such scenarios or avoid them altogether.

Manzoni is associate professor of management and founding director of the research initiative on high-performance organizations at INSEAD, in Fontainebleau, France.

He is a three-time winner of INSEAD's Outstanding Teacher Award and performs training and consulting work for several large international organizations.

Barsoux is senior research fellow at INSEAD, where he specializes in organizational behavior, and is the author or co-author of nine books, including *Managing Across Cultures* and *The Global Challenge*. His study of the uses of humor in organizations, *Funny Business*, won the Management Consultancies Association prize for Book of the Year.

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