

# Training Magazine

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### A book review by Janice Love

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#### **The Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome**

By Jean-François Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux

**Harvard Business School** Publishing

Boston, 278 pages, \$26.95, (800) 988-0886

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Engaging: 4.5

Usefulness: 4.5

Innovative: 5

Visual Aids: 5

"The sad reality is that once people are miscast as weaker performers, they tend to live down to that image regardless of their capabilities."

In 1998, Manzoni and Barsoux published an article on the "Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome" in the Harvard Business Review. They got so much feedback and response, HBR asked if they could write a book about it. And voila--a mere four years later, after hundreds of hours of interviews and much research, here it is.

It made me feel uncomfortable right away. The thought that as a manager I might have been unwittingly setting up weaker performers to fail was a little unnerving. I recognized some of the symptoms as things I've done, thinking all along that I was acting as a responsible manager.

The basic premise is that when a boss perceives an employee as a lower performer, the boss mentally labels the employee as such, and treats the employee differently than higher performers. The employee's actions are viewed through the boss' lower performer filter, resulting in the boss seeing exactly what he or she expected to see--weaker performance. As a result, the boss provides more direction, grants less latitude and requires more frequent reporting. The subordinates exacerbate the situation by living down to expectations. This starts the boss and the subordinate in a downward spiral that results in continued lower performance as well as deterioration of the working relationship.

Now don't jump to conclusions that the authors are bleeding hearts who

preach that every employee can be a high performer. They readily admit that sometimes termination of employment is the best option.

Manzoni and Barsoux offer a number of strategies to reverse the syndrome and stop the downward spiral. Unfortunately, these strategies, while cognitively easy to understand, are not so easy to actually enact.

Some managers might be inclined to pooh-pooh the ideas put forth in this book. But if you really listen to what they have to say, you begin to get this uncomfortable feeling that maybe they're on to something here.