

Changing views of workplace relations:

The failure to manage poorly performing staff is often the result of a syndrome that is endemic from classroom to boardroom, a new book argues.

By Richard Donkin¹

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There is so much written on leadership and empowerment these days it is easy to forget that in the vast majority of organisations people are still managing other people. The model of the visionary, inspirational leader, coaching and mentoring highly motivated teams has become so familiar that it is tempting to overlook the reality of most workplace relationships.

The workplace, for almost all salaried employees, is still about bosses and subordinates, however light the management touch. A front-line employee deals with a team leader who answers to a higher boss who in turn reports to an even higher boss. These relationships often suffer due to misguided approaches adopted by well meaning managers when dealing with poor performance, say Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux, the authors of a forthcoming book, *The Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome**. The book is a development of research that emerged four years ago in a Harvard Business Review article. Now, with research that covers interviews and surveys among 3,000 international executives, the authors are convinced that their syndrome is endemic from the classroom to the boardroom.

Part of the problem, they say, is the tendency to make snap judgments about others or to be influenced by a small, potentially unreliable piece of information. They quote one experiment in which a group of students is informed about the professor who is about to give a lecture. Everyone is told that the lecturer is industrious, critical, practical and determined. In addition half the class is told that the lecturer is "rather cold" and half is told he is "very warm".

When asked to rate the lecturer afterwards, those who had been told that he was warm gave a much more positive response than those in the other half of the class, describing him as participative, open and considerate. Psychologists describe this reaction as "confirmatory bias". People employ selective observation based on their existing prejudices.

Transfer this phenomenon to bosses who have discovered weak performances among members of their teams. Their reaction, very often, is to begin looking for faults and overlooking achievements.

The reverse can be true if a manager believes he or she has a gifted group of employees. Studies have pointed to a direct link between the expectations of bosses and the performance of subordinates. This is called the "Pygmalion effect". In one study a researcher told teachers that their pupils had been IQ tested. The researcher said the tests had identified one group of pupils as having high potential; and a second group as having normal potential. The statements were false since the students had been sorted into equivalent ability groups after their tests.

Three months later a second IQ test found that those described as gifted had significantly higher scores than those presented as normal. The teacher of the first group had been led to expect higher performance and the class responded to these expectations. The higher scoring children were still outperforming the rest some six years later.

Much of this effect involves self-belief. In another study, smokers wanting to quit were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Those in the first group were told their selection had not been random but based on questionnaire responses which had highlighted their willpower and strong potential to give up smoking. They were put through a 14-week course of lessons giving advice about how best to go about giving up. Those in the second group were given the same course but were told they had been selected at random. Those in the third group had no programme or special instructions but were told they would be contacted later. At the end of the 14 weeks, some two-thirds of the first group had stopped smoking, compared with 28 per cent of the second group and just 6 per cent of the third.

In each of these cases - school pupils and smokers - the most successful performance was triggered by belief, either among the group or among those in authority, that they could and would do well. Now transfer the experience to a manager and a work team in which some people are regarded as poorer performers. The perception may be accurate or it may be mistaken. Mr Manzoni and Mr Barsoux contend that this is irrelevant. What does matter is the way the manager reacts.

The typical response, they say, is to intervene more often with those whose performance is perceived as poor. Instead of responding positively, people tend to lose confidence as they interpret their boss's concern for what it is - a lack of trust in their abilities.

Mr Manzoni and Mr Barsoux make a compelling case that this phenomenon is real and damaging. But what are we to do about it? How can we expect managers and subordinates to resist patterns of thinking and behaviour that have developed over generations? The authors admit that their remedies may appear counter-intuitive for those reared in the "up or out" school of management.

First, managers have to identify that they themselves are likely to be a big part of the problem. Then they must rethink the issues leading to their perception and question the accuracy of their judgment. Putting aside early conclusions, they should start to look for the positives on which to build a new relationship with the employee. Finally, they will need to discuss the problem with the employee candidly but sympathetically. They may even need to admit they have been wrong.

Some of this advice may be wishful thinking. There are enough remarks reported in the book to discern that many managers simply do not care that much. The authors say, "The sad reality is that once people are miscast as weaker performers, they tend to live down to that image regardless of their capabilities."

One conclusion from the research is that the so-called "war for talent" should not be fought out among competing employers but within the existing ranks of individual employers.

Furthermore, it should be regarded as less of a war and more of an intellectual process. Not all stars shine so brightly. There is a message here for the hidden stars too - never stay where you think you're not valued.

* The Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome, How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail, by Jean-Francois Manzoni and Jean-Louis Barsoux is to be published in October by Harvard Business School Press, price Dollars 26.95. richard.donkin@ft.com

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